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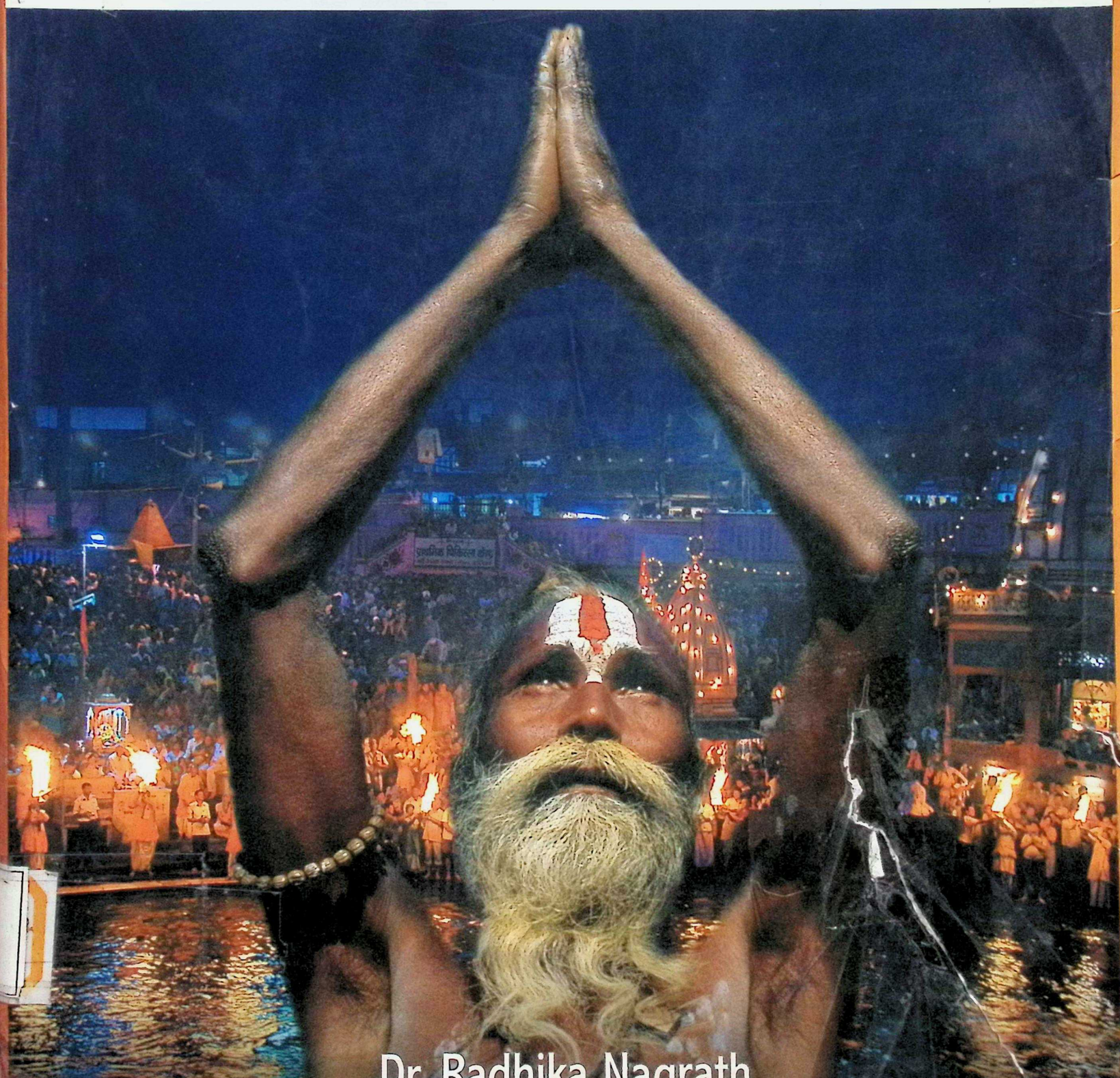
THE CARNIVAL OF PEACE

KUMBH TEERTHAM HARIDWARAM



Dr. Radhika Nagrath

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They gathered by millions and the number crossed 80 million! It was their candid attempt towards initiation of self-awakening and quest for peace and immortality at a place of complete transformation. Maha Kumbh Mela 2010 – a festival of faith embellished with noises of all kinds mystifying all description – yet bequeathed a message of peace. Beating of gongs and drums, blaring of trumpets, conch shells blowing and bells ringing, musicians performing, troops of acrobats displaying super human skills and bursting of fire crackers off and on, palanquins of gold, silver and white gold carrying the royal renunciants greeted the eye of a traveler at this congregation of faith and peace.

What can be more pleasing and peaceful than the soothing effect of illuminated lamps floating down the Ganges stream in leaf boats loaded with floral petals?

Dr. Radhika Nagrath recalls the spiritual caravan of peace activists, Naga sadhus, tantriks, pilgrims, mystical walkers, wandering monks, miracle workers, roaming philosophers, natives of the land and foreigners at Kumbh mela of 2010 in Haridwar.

In sharp contrast with other coffee table books which picturise the scenes of royal chariots, rituals of sadhus with matted dreadlocks, Carnival of peace Kumbh Teertham Haridwaram gives some personal encounters of the author with sadhus and deliberates on how the fair acted as the prime and impeccable platform for peace lovers.

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ॐ द्यौः शान्तिरन्तरिक्षः शान्तिः पृथ्वी, शान्तिरापः शान्तिः रोषधयः शान्तिः।
वनस्पतयः शान्तिर्विश्वे देवाः,शान्तिब्रह्मा, शान्तिः सर्वं शान्तिः शान्तिरेव शान्तिः सा मा शान्तिरेधि।।
ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः।।

UNTO THE HEAVEN BE PEACE, UNTO THE SKY AND THE EARTH BE PEACE,
PEACE BE UNTO THE WATER, UNTO THE HERBS AND TREES BE PEACE,
UNTO ALL THE GODS BE PEACE, UNTO BRAHMA AND UNTO ALL BE PEACE
AND MAY WE REALIZE THAT PEACE. OM PEACE PEACE PEACE

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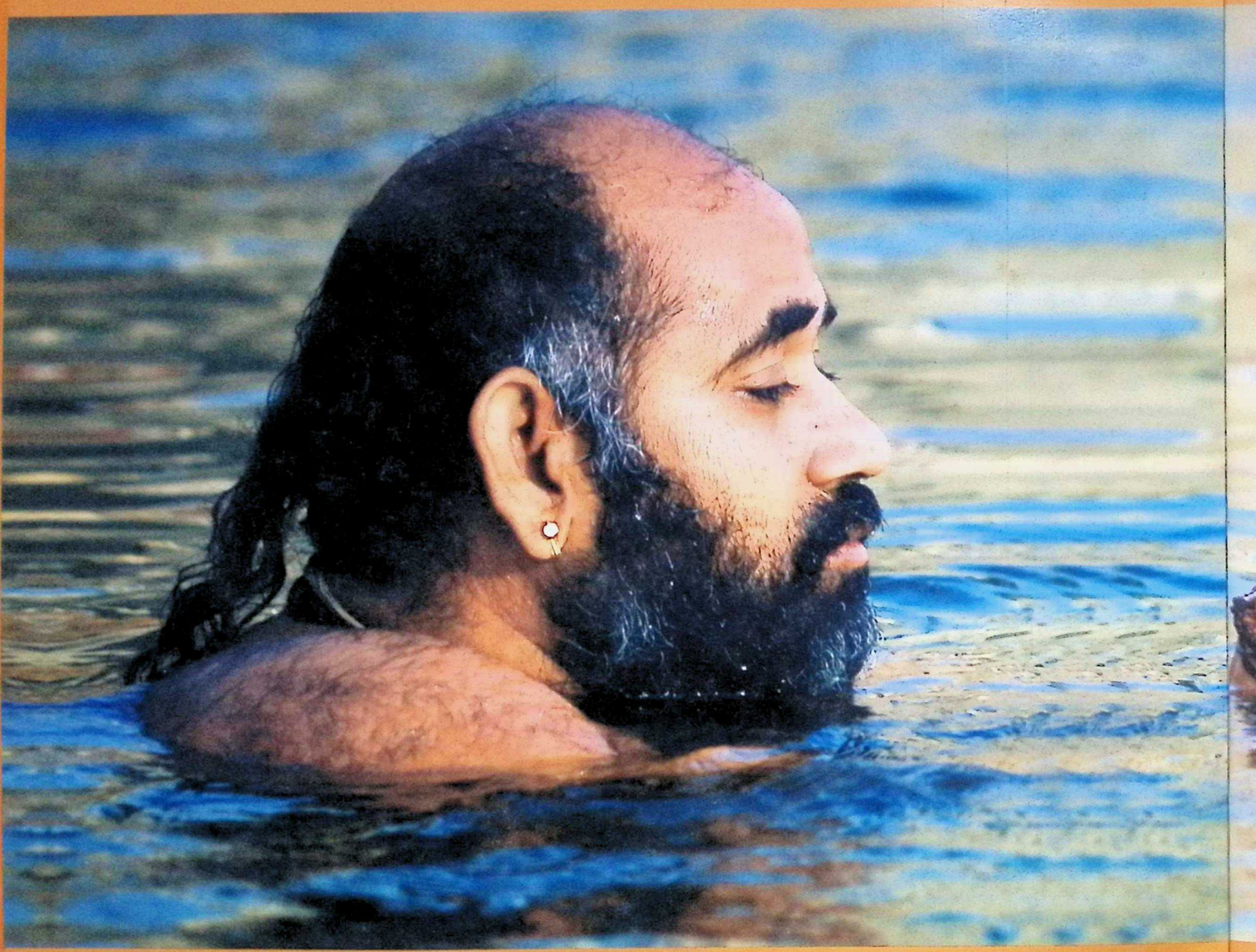

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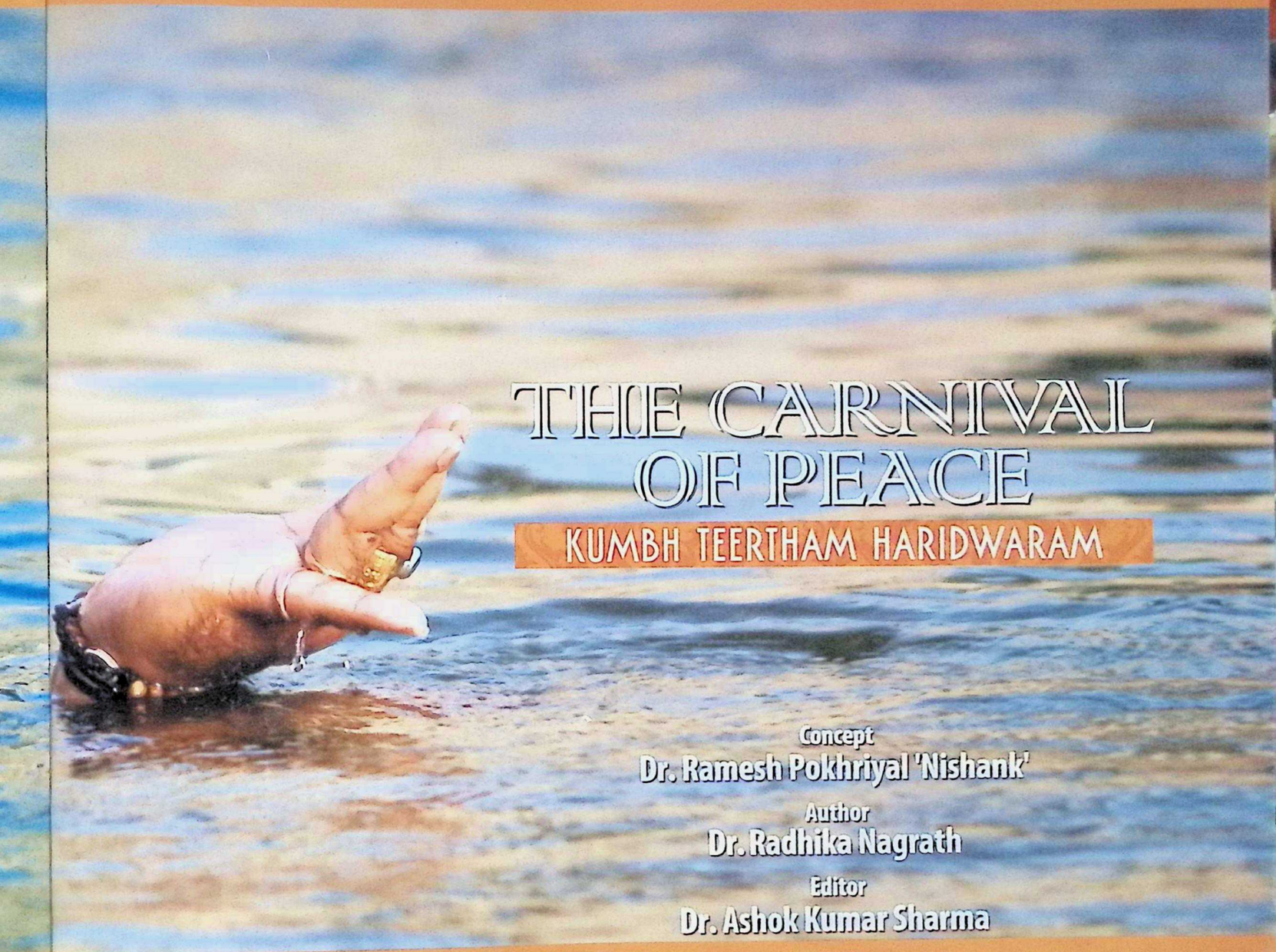

THE CARNIVAL OF PEACE

KUMBH TEERTHAM HARIDWARAM

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Peshwai, the official march of prominent religious groups registering their presence in the holy city.

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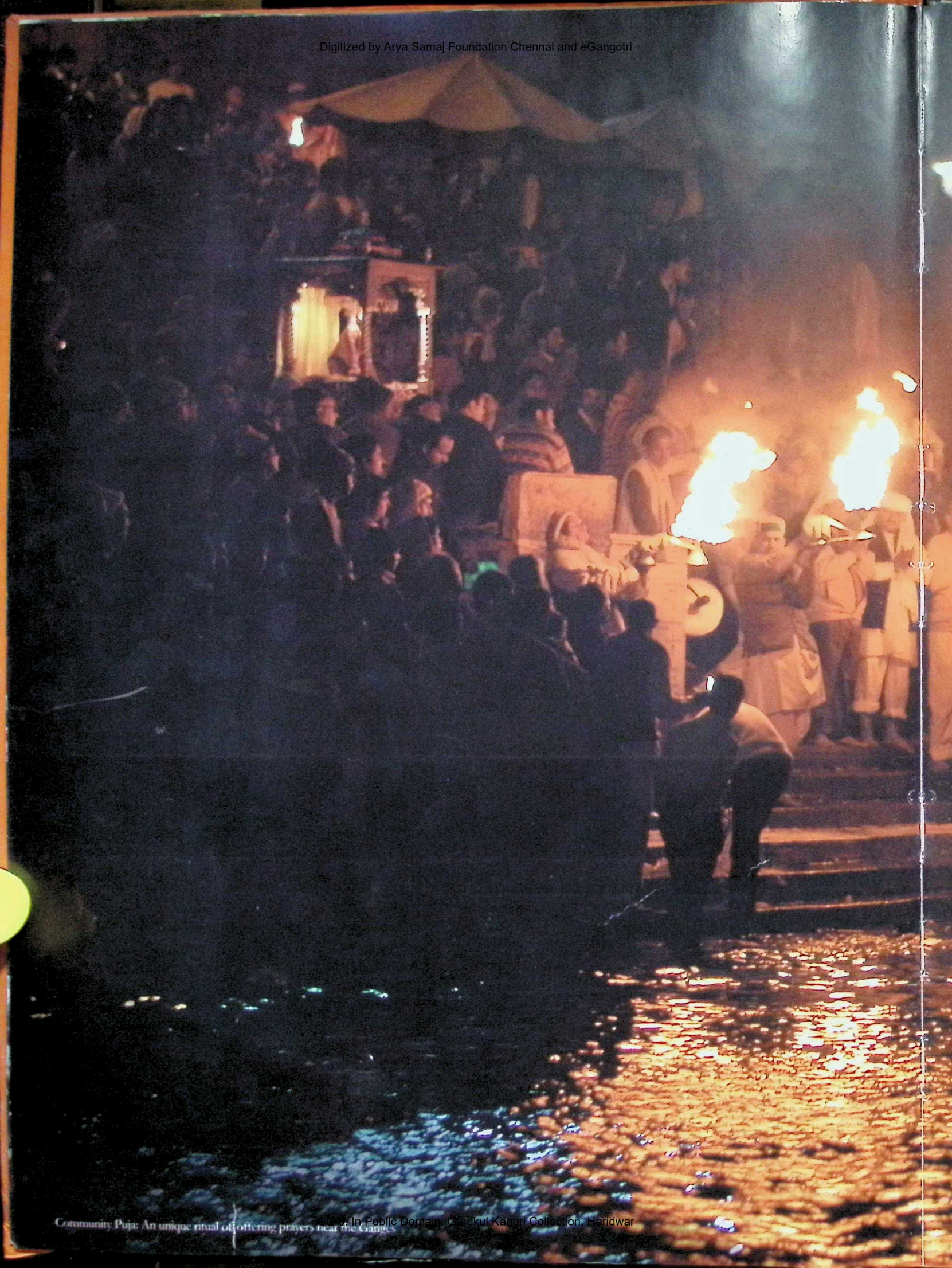

Community Puja: An unique ritual of offering prayers near the Ganges

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Procession of saints from all over India with their peculiar & unique symbols

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Kumbh Mela 2010

11th Jan to 30th April
Haridwar, Uttrakhand
10 Auspicious Dates
10 Processions
13 Akhara
110 Days
140 Countires
300 Ghats
372 Ashrams
500 Year Long Tradition
525 Yajnas
1392 Hectare of Land
9440 Medical Staff
40000 Security Personel
1.2 Millions Saints
80 Millions Pilgrims
240 Millions Meals Served
330 Millions Gods
Unlimited Chants
Unlimited Faiths and Devotion
Unlimited Holy Dips

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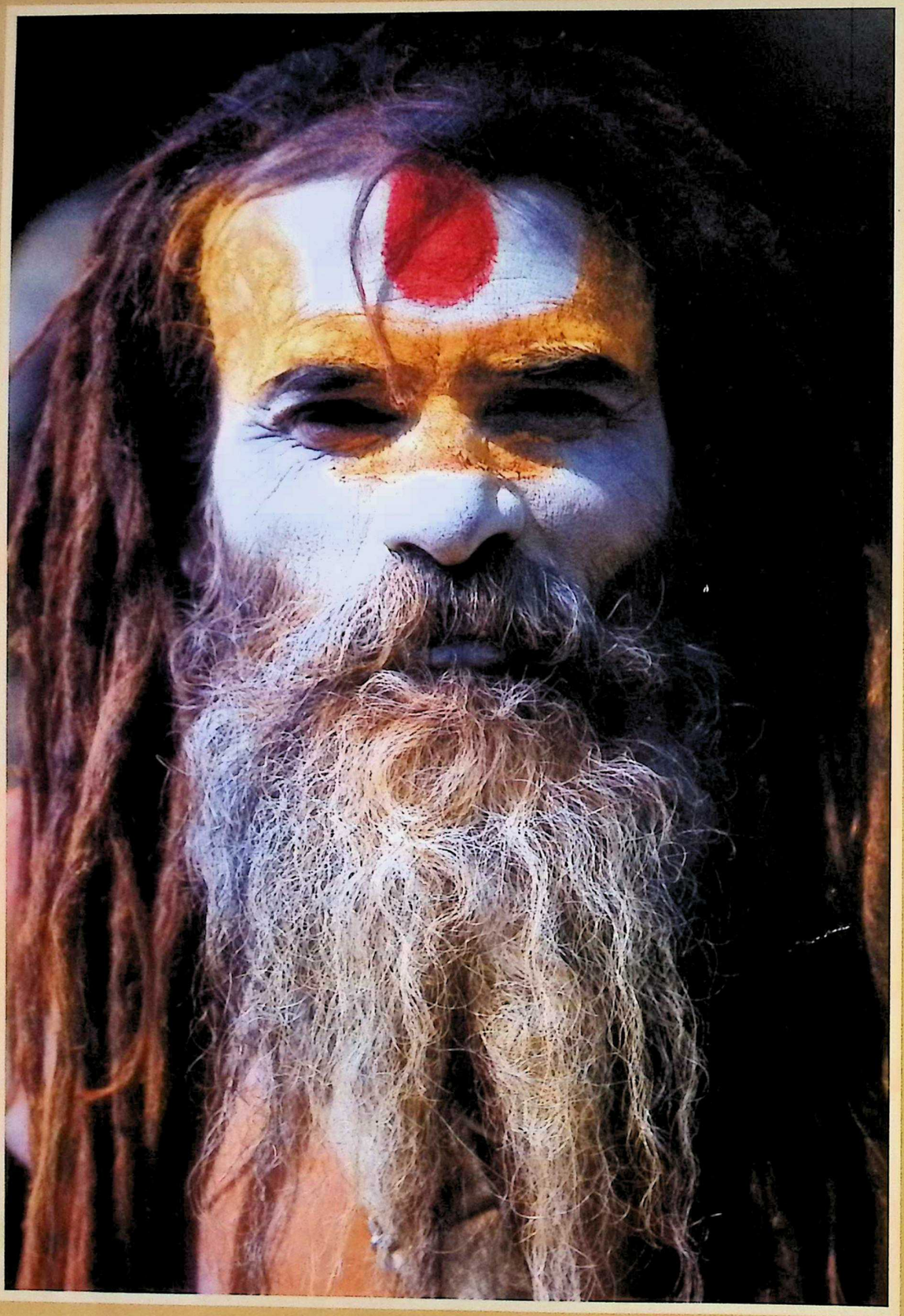

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India is a river civilization and many grand fairs and festivals are attached with the eternal flows of the Ganges, which traverses its flow from Gaumukh in the Himalayas up to the plains of Haridwar. Kumbh mela is the single, largest spiritual gathering of people in the world who come here to seek peace of mind. The mega fair is celebrated under the zodiac sign of Kumbh (Aquarius) to mark the scriptural "Amrit kumbh" (nectareal kumbh) on the banks of the Ganges at sanctum sanctorum "Har Ki Pauri." A teerth is a pilgrimage site, with its literal meaning in Sanskrit as "a ford" – a shallow place in a river where one can walk or drive across. Haridwar is one of four teerthas where the religious extravaganza is held after every twelve years. It has been observed for centuries. Countless people visit for spiritual emancipation and attainment of peace.

Mahakumbh (2010) can be tagged as a high - technology peace movement with lot of infrastructural developments by the administration. The Mahakumbh fair was celebrated from January 14 to April 30 (2010), highlighting the grand processions and snans (royal baths) of various saints (akharas), role of saints and significant traditions in establishing peace at historical times and the relevance of the modern Kumbh mela

Most of these are part of the special coverage for the news daily, Hindustan Times, for which I am a regular correspondent. The text is based on first hand experiences and observations that catch the moods of the city. Together and independently, the photographs and the text highlight sublime beauty and magnificence of the carnival of peace at the Kumbh Teertham I, which is Haridwar.

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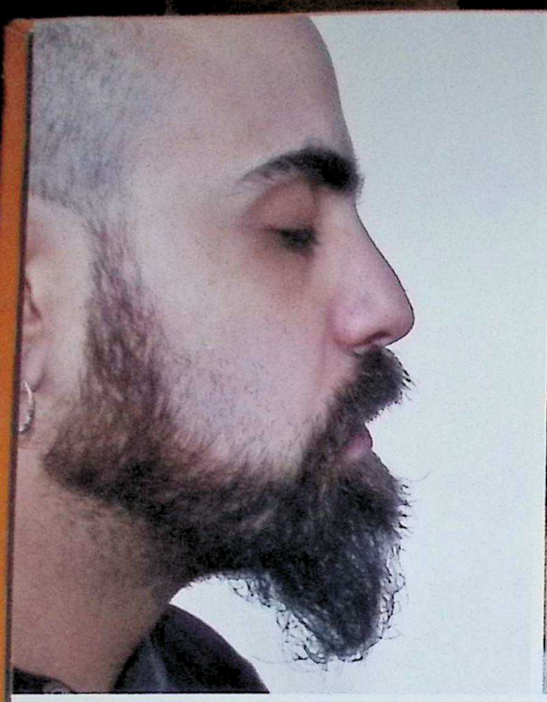
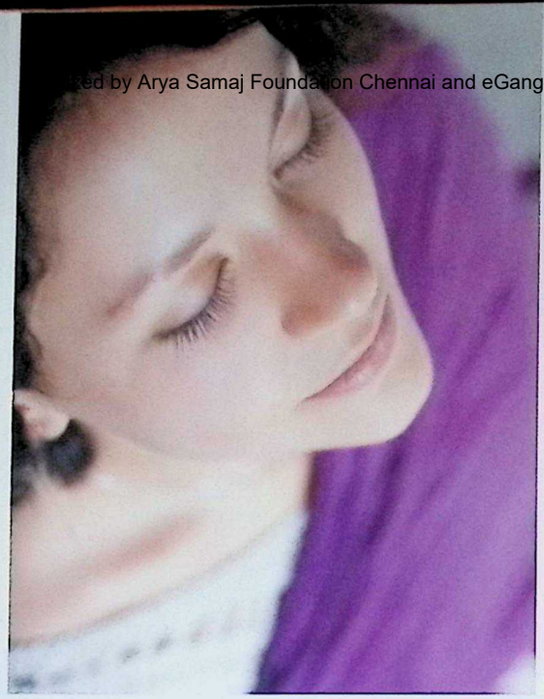
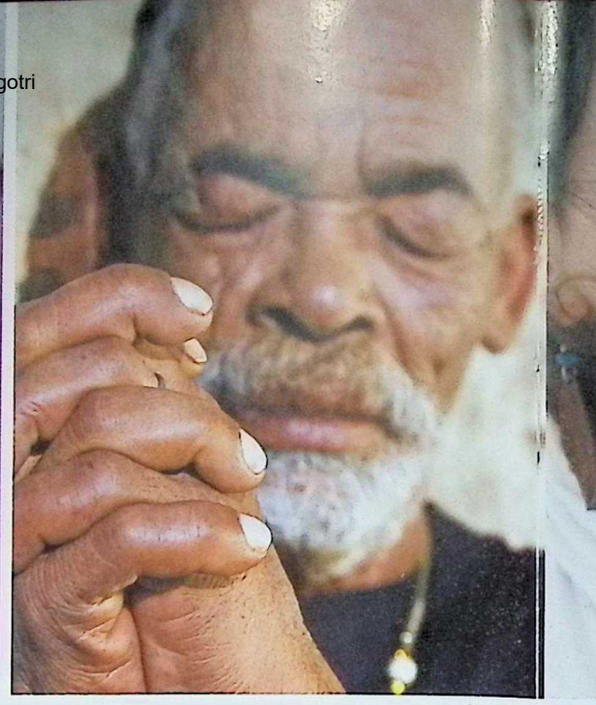
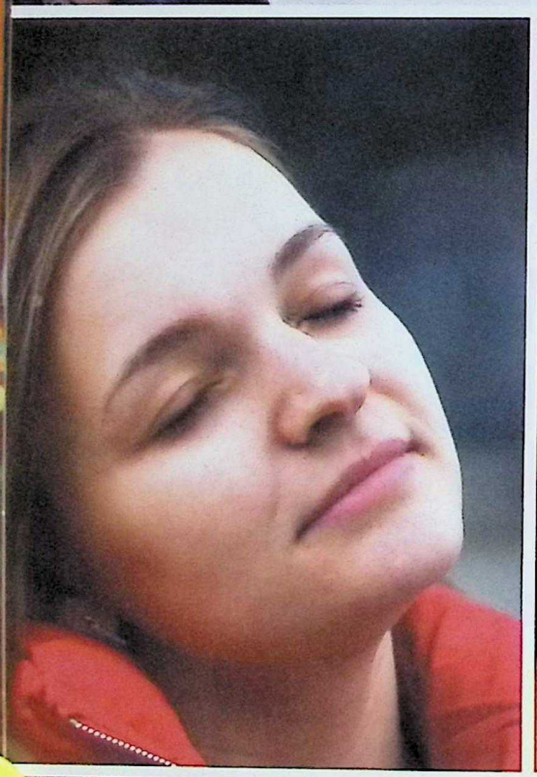
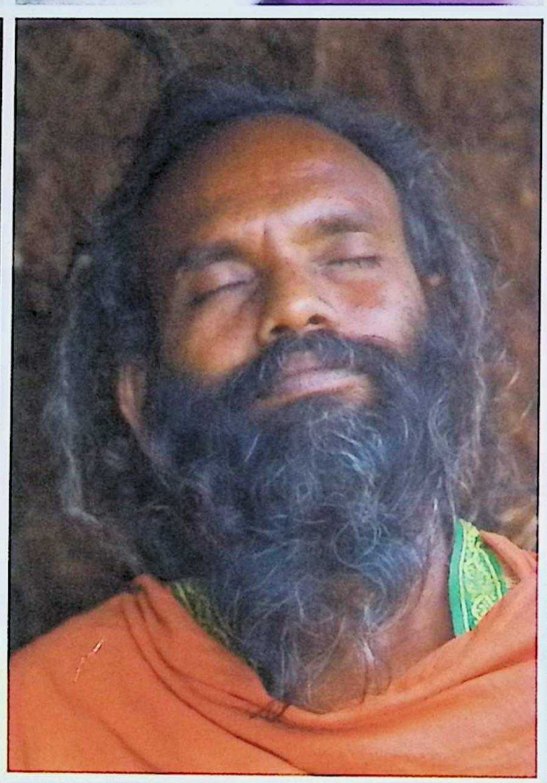
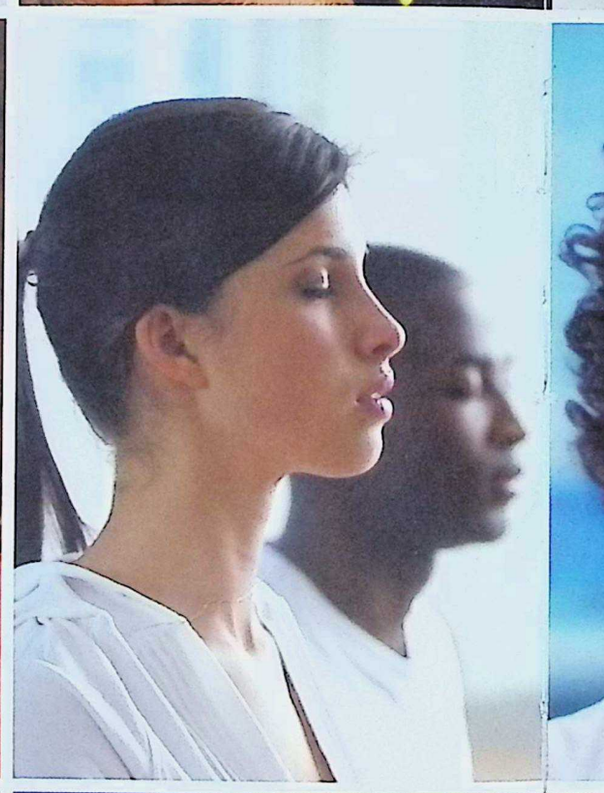
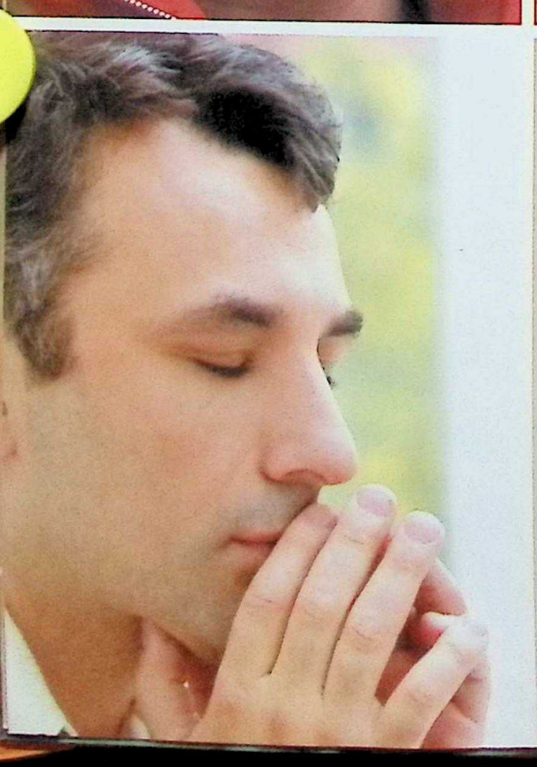
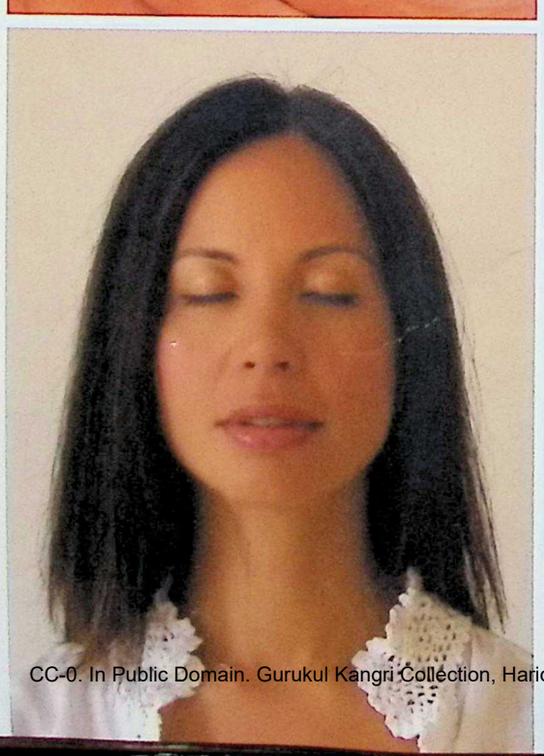
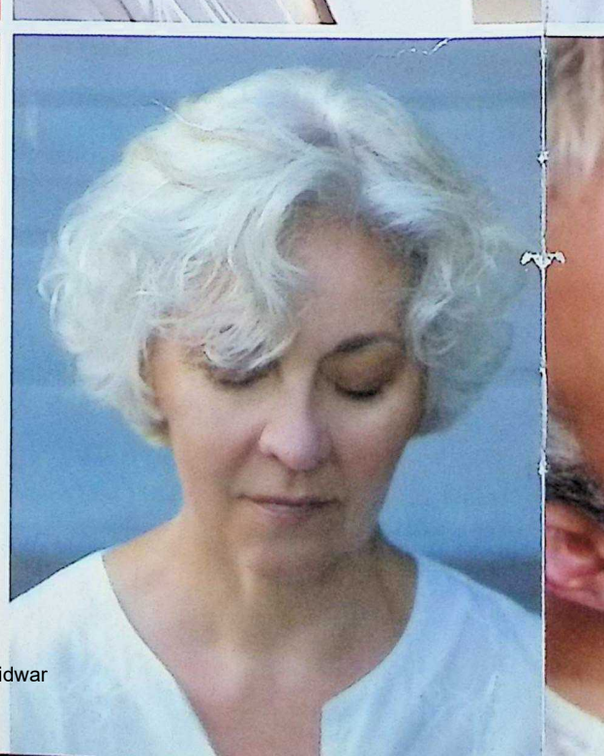

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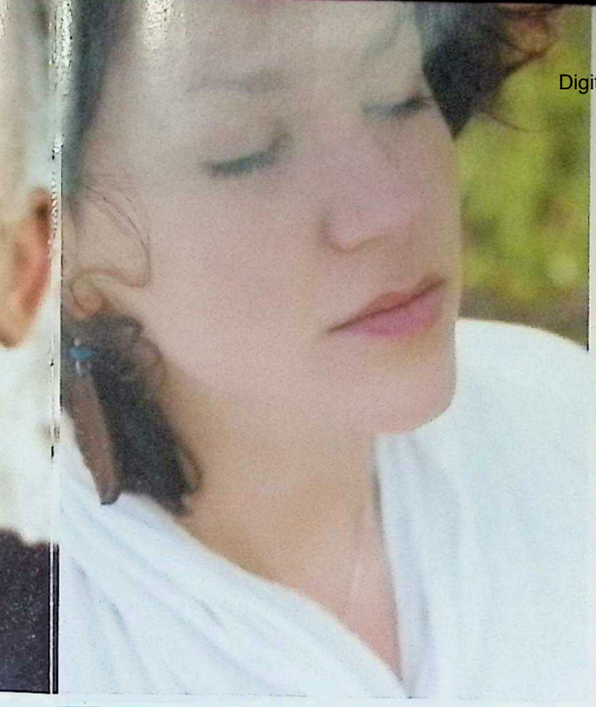
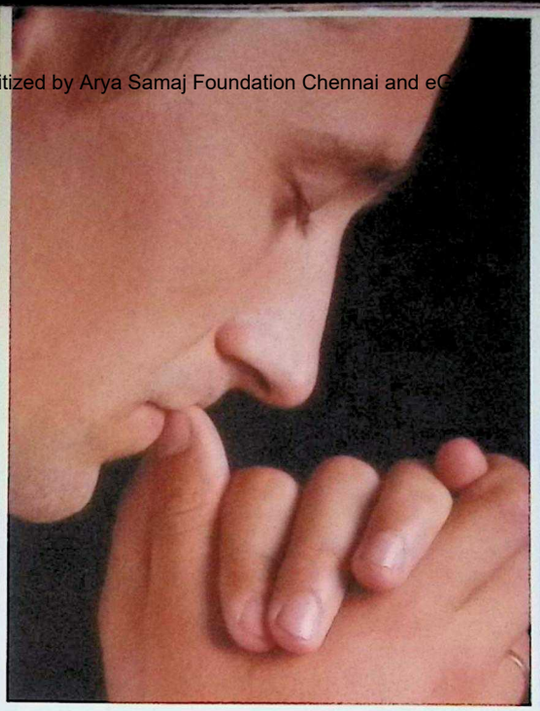

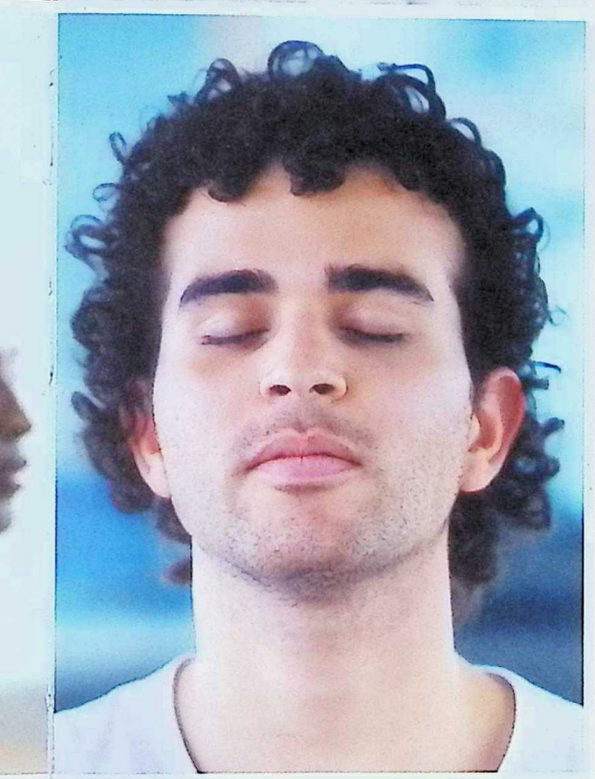

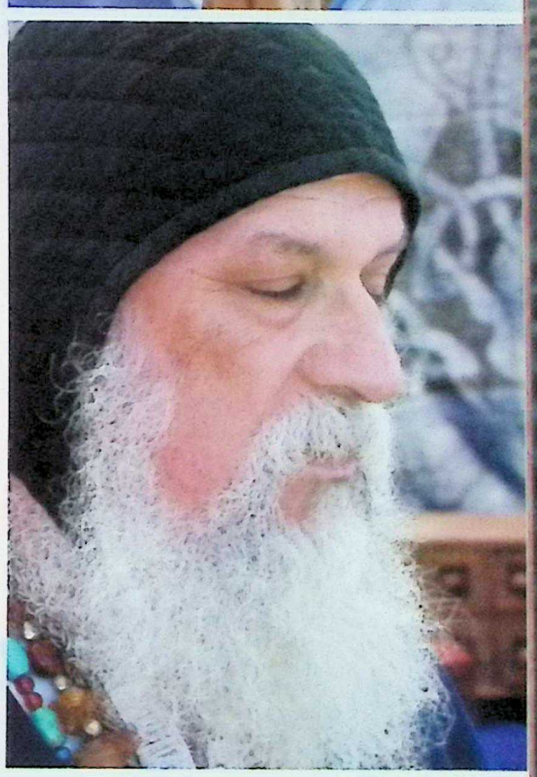
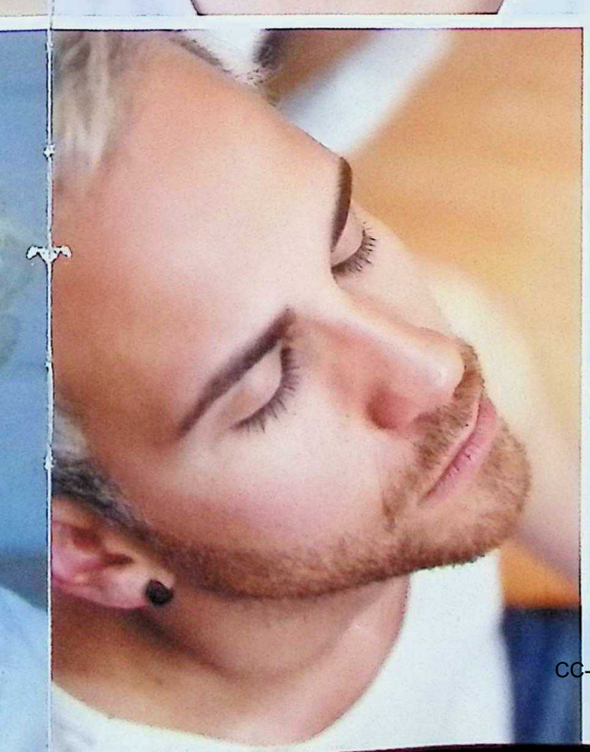
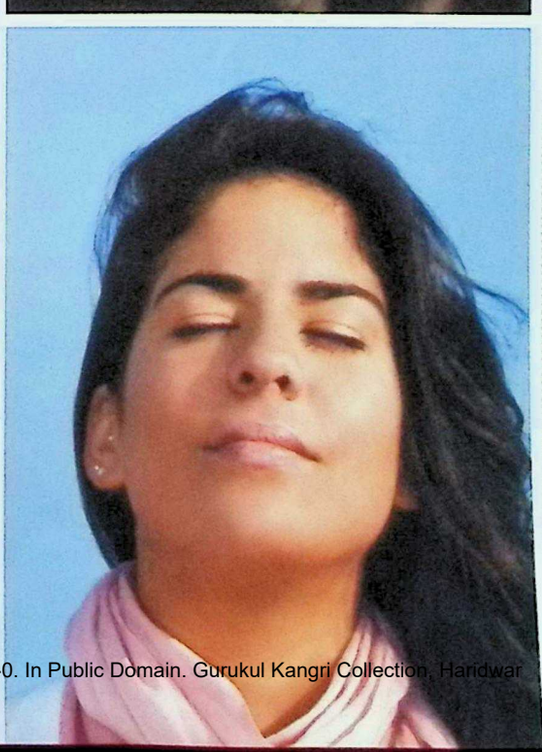
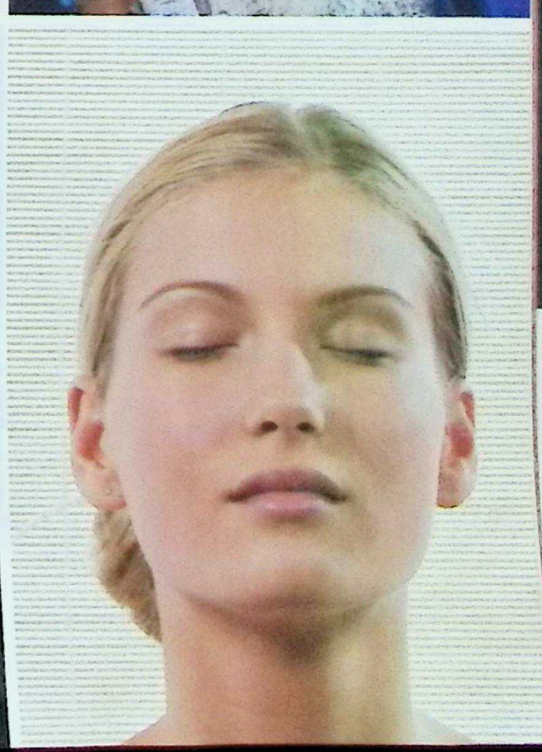

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PREFACE

The idea of writing coffee table book originated in my mind when I met a German journalist Nina Sang, who had come from middle east on behalf of Al Jazeera broadcasting for coverage on Kumbh mela. She was looking for a coffee table book on Kumbh mela of Haridwar at a bookshop in the main city area and the book store person failed to give her any such book. Realising the need and power of kumbh pilgrimage which draws thousands of pilgrims to the fair in search of peace, I took the plunge of compiling the magnanimous work narrating my close encounters with 'babas' (ascetics) at kumbh nagar.

Kumbh Teertham Haridwaram is a celebration of Kumbh festivities, its people, landscapes, and traditional religious culture. Featuring 500 beautifully produced color photographs, this work of art is a visual and religious delight. It combines history, geography, and travelogue, painting an insightful portrait of India's diverse religiosity and culture. The book captures the essence of Indian religion and spirituality.

India, of course, is one of the original 'melting pots.' Pluralistic, multilingual, and multi-ethnic, India is a society with numerous ethnicities and over 1,650 languages and dialects and kumbh mela acts as a platform for conglomeration of these diversities near Ganga at Har Ki Pauri.

During my spiritual sojourn, I chanced to meet such rare seekers whose experiences if I accord, can be stretched to many books at a length. It was difficult to choose amongst these for this book since each one of them had an interesting inspirational story behind him. It has been a difficult endeavour to pick up the right photo and text catching the wide sense of the moods of the holy city during the fest.

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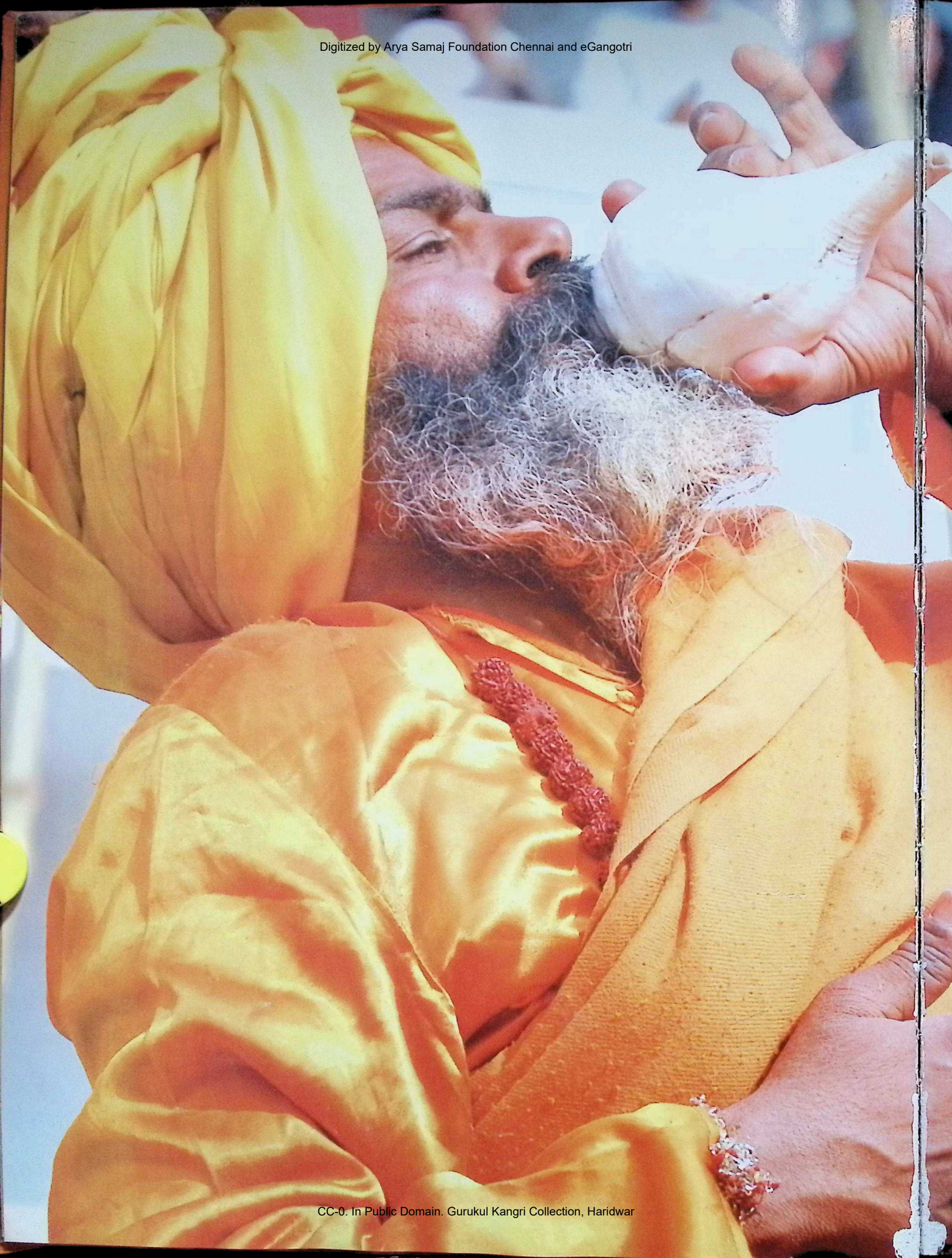

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कुम्भो वनिष्ठुर्जनिता शचीभिर्यस्मिन्नग्रे योन्यां गर्भो अन्तः
प्लाशिर्व्यक्तः शतधार उत्सो दुहे न कुम्भी स्वर्धा पितृभ्यः

THE GOOD AND RIGHTEOUS KARMA OF PARTICIPATING IN THE KUMBHA BESTOWS PHYSICAL HAPPINESS ON THE MAN IN THIS LOKA (PLANE OF EXISTENCE) AND HAPPINESS FOR MANY LIFETIMES HEREAFTER.

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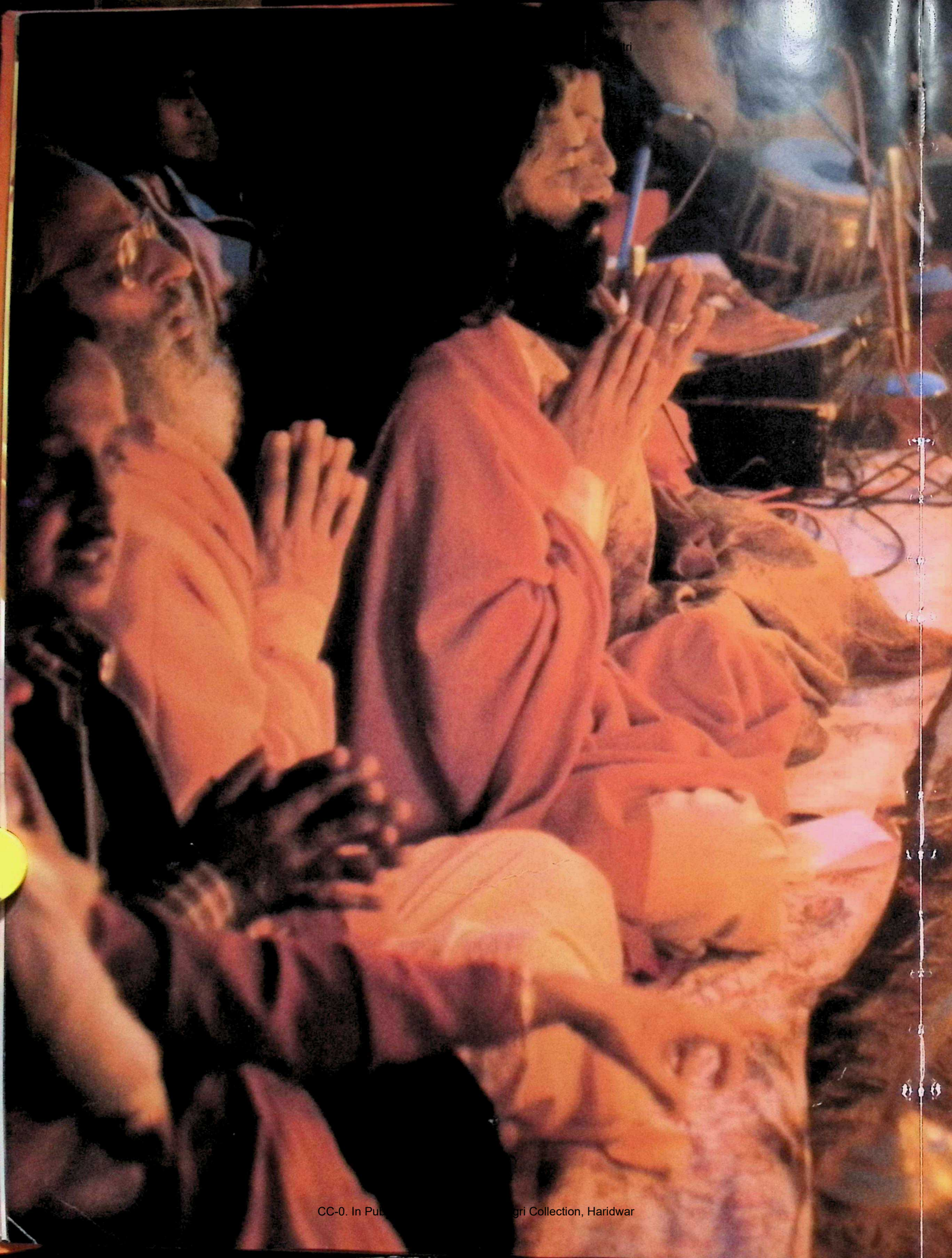

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Nobel Prize winner, Mother Teresa had said, *"If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."* The feeling of 'belongingness' is revived at the holy conglomeration of Kumbh mela. This is the main concept behind organizing such fairs of grand magnitude. The experience of sharing the space with millions of people from all over the world gathered at one place, with immense religious zeal, devotion to sacraments, prayers and meditation is overwhelming. Kumbh festival is a live representation of unity in diversity.

To reach peace, teach peace- **Pope John Paul II**

This ostentatious fair induces a sense of exclusivity with highly devoted religious establishments, sages, ascetics, sadhus and akharas congregating from all across India. They set up special representative camps in tent cities. This way, they are straight accessible to those who made a stopover and want to participate in worship, seek guidance or catch up with valuable spiritual sermons. Special emphasis is also given to discussion on current global problems associated to peace and plenitude.

Originally a fair of gods, demi-gods and kings that commemorated the celestial battle between gods and demons over a pitcher (kumbh) holding the sacred nectar of immortality (amrit), present-day Kumbh mela is an international event and closely observed by the entire world at large. The beauty of this grand fair lies in successful conglomeration of diverse cultures, castes and creeds. This has also made Kumbh mela of Haridwar a sacred occasion of communal cognizance sharing similar belief and motive. The primary goal of visitors here is to achieve immortality, attaining peace of mind.

Apparently no mass pilgrimage of this magnitude has been observed to encompass ample potential to provide valuable qualities as salvation, peace, consummation and discipline of dispassion as kumbh mela. This grand fair is held right at the gateway of gods, Haridwar (Gateway to Lord Vishnu). Right from the first Kumbh mela to the very recent one in 2001, the pious fair served as 'Sanjeevani' (the miraculous life giving herb) to millions of people gathering to attain complete solace for their mind and soul.

Peace is every step- **Thich Nhat Hahn**

Mythology says that Lord Shiva had once exclaimed, *"If a man on an auspicious day begins to bathe in the Ganges, he dwells cheerfully in Vishnu's heavenly world (Vaikunth), for the number of years equal to the number of his footsteps he takes to reach Ganga."* A dip in the Ganges symbolizes the spiritual urge of the Atman, the individual soul, to merge with Brahman, the Supreme Reality. The symbolism of myths to dive into water means 'to delve into the mystery of Maya.' The aim of Indian philosophy has been to understand and explode the secret of the enticement of Maya (illusion) and to come out of the cycle of births and rebirths.

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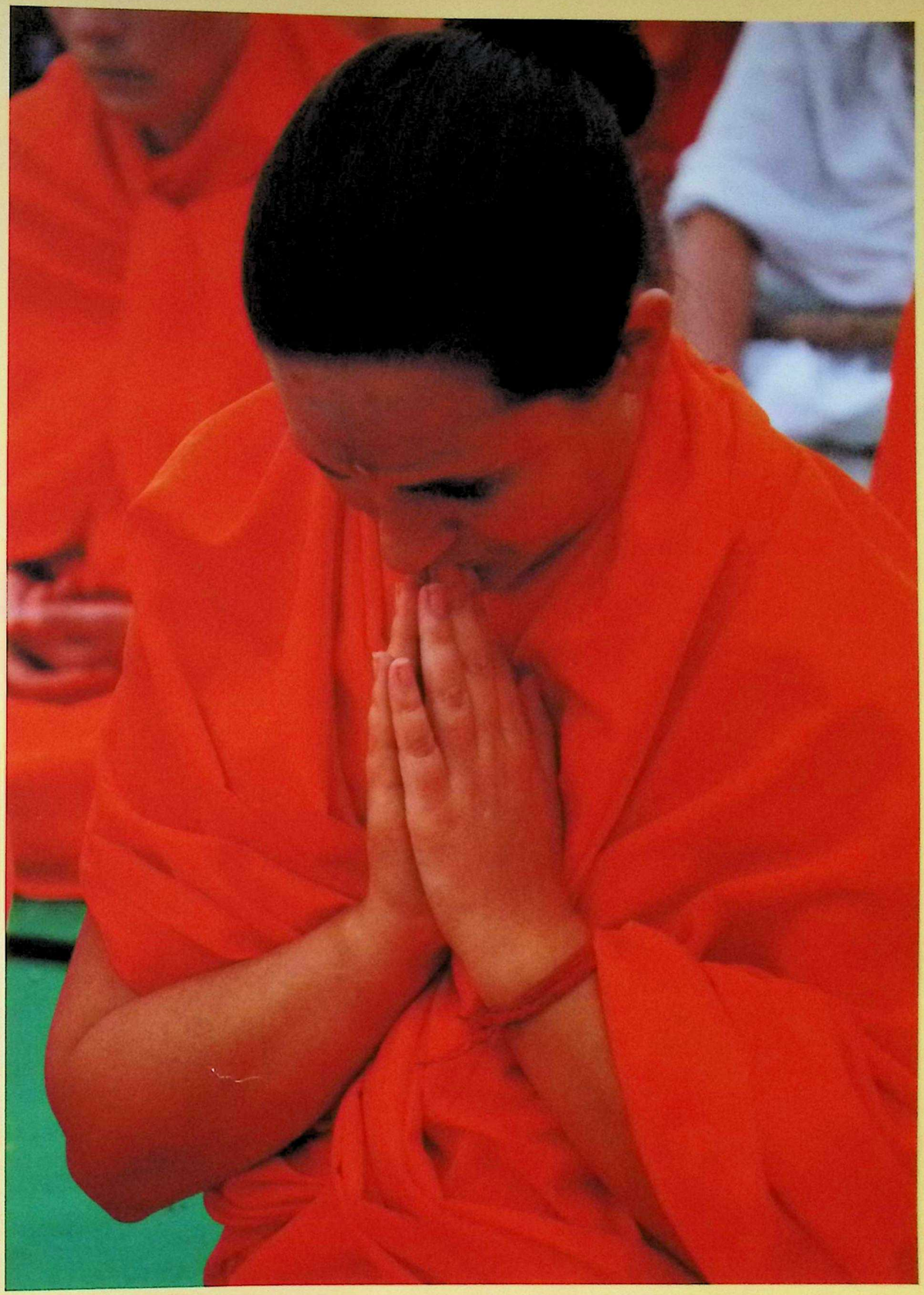

A foreign devotee amidst prayers

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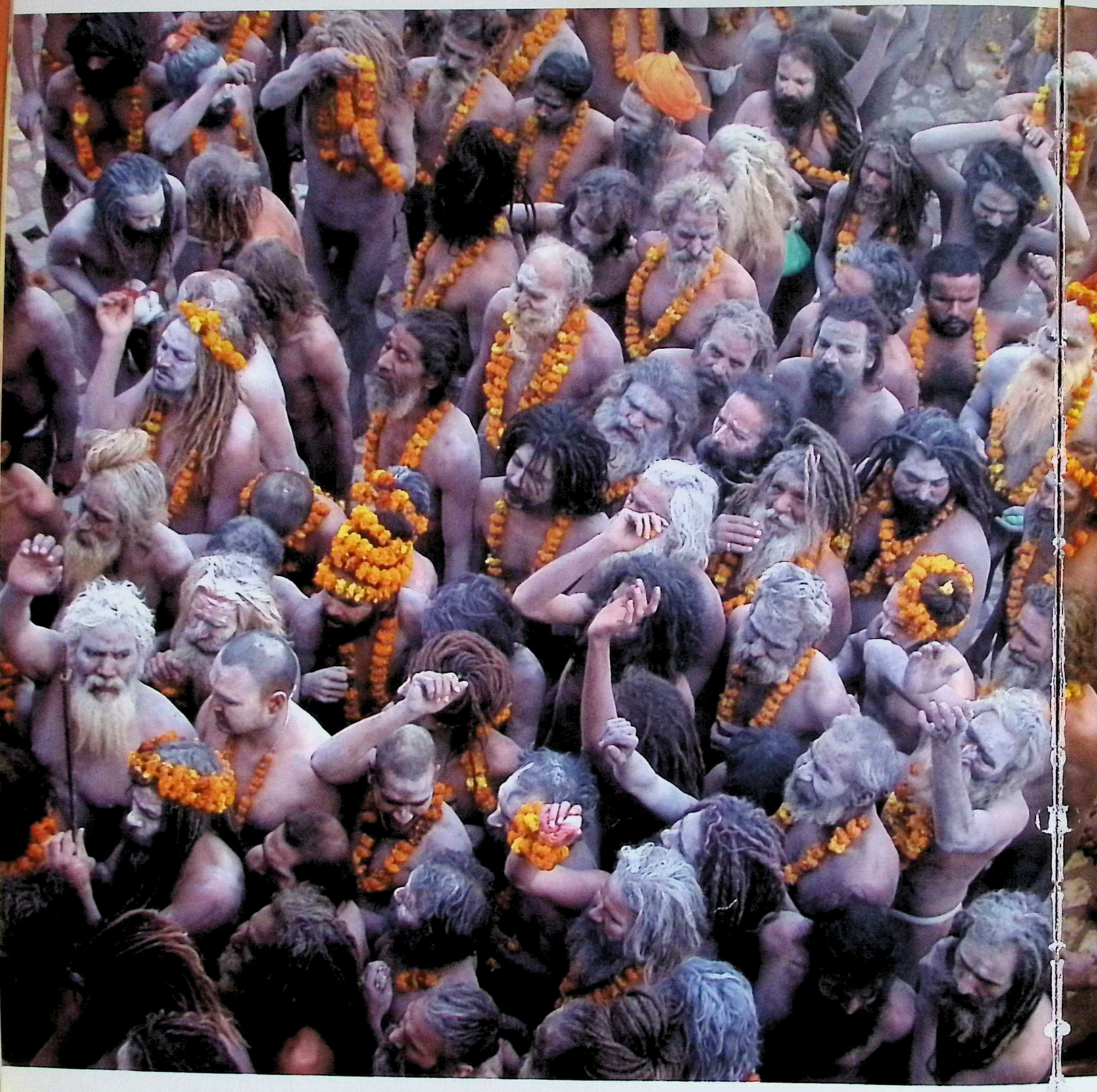

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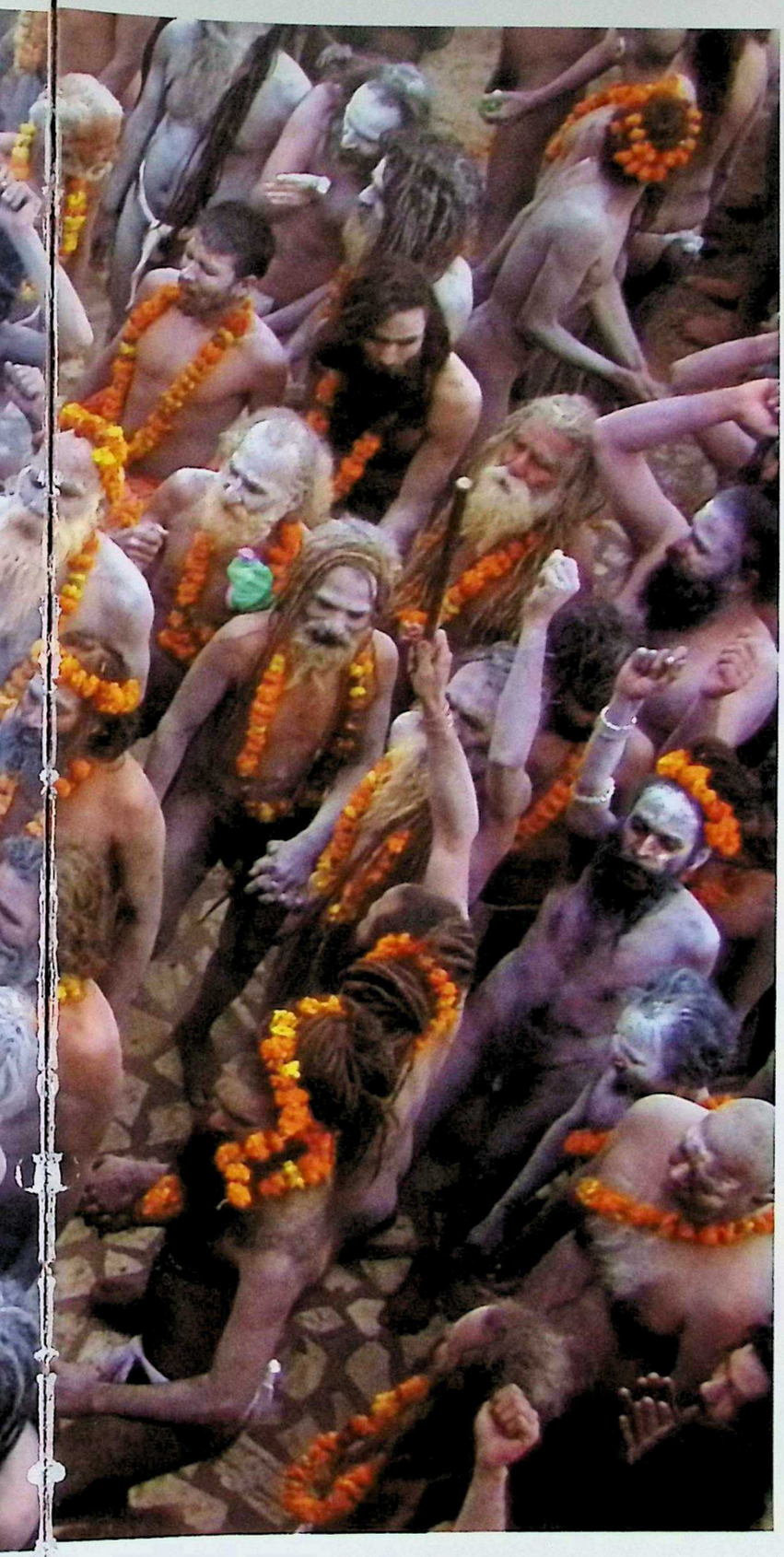

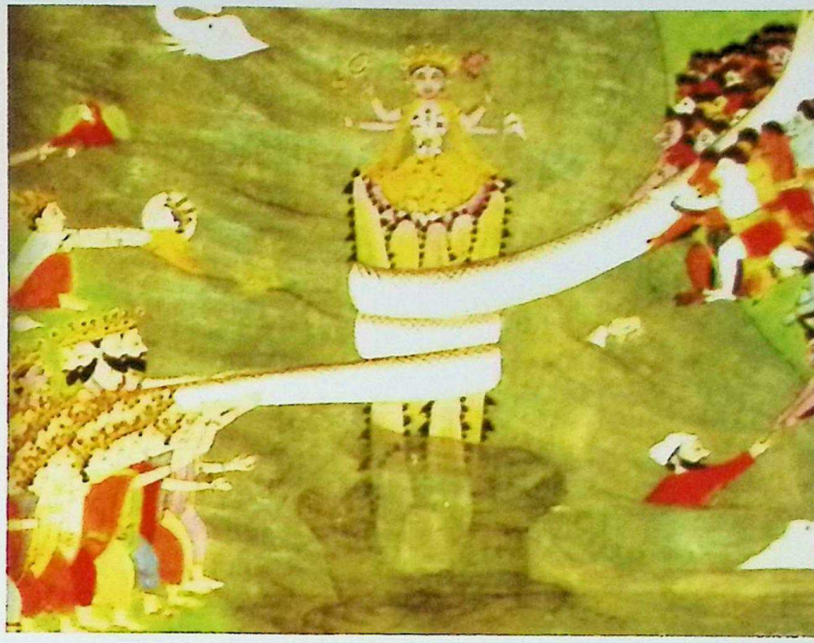

Top: Churning of ocean painted in 1870
Above: Har ki Pauri in 1880

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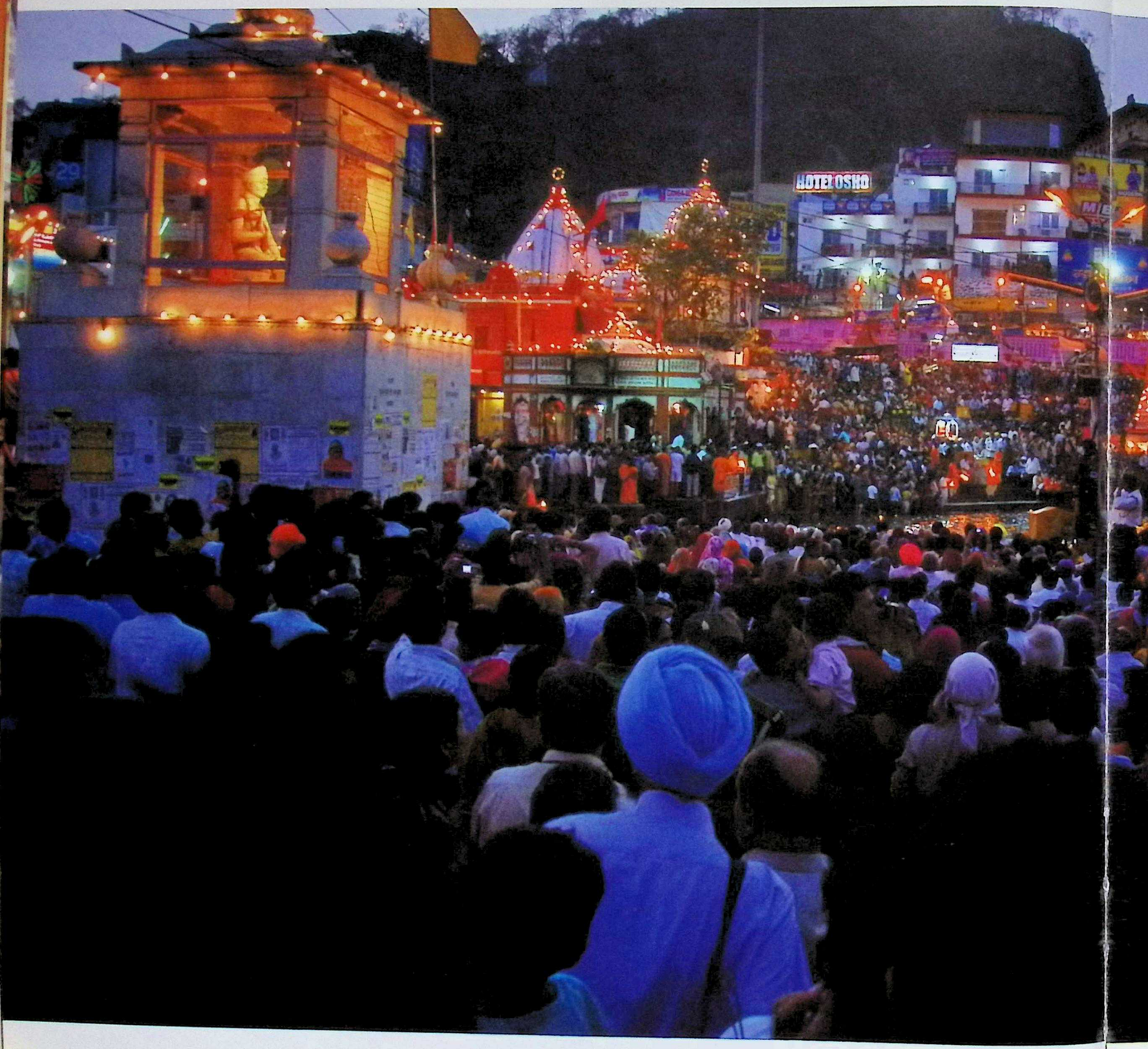

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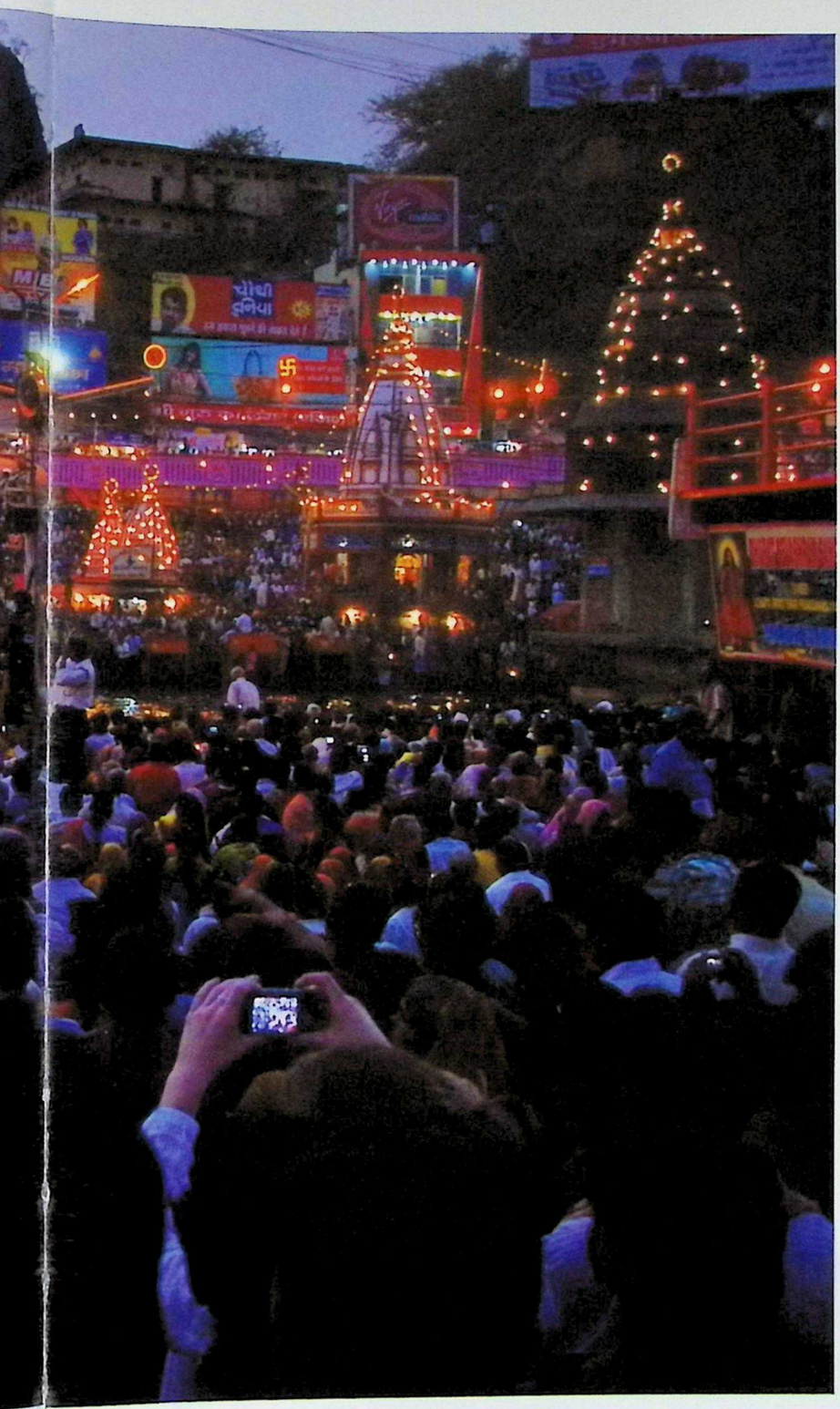

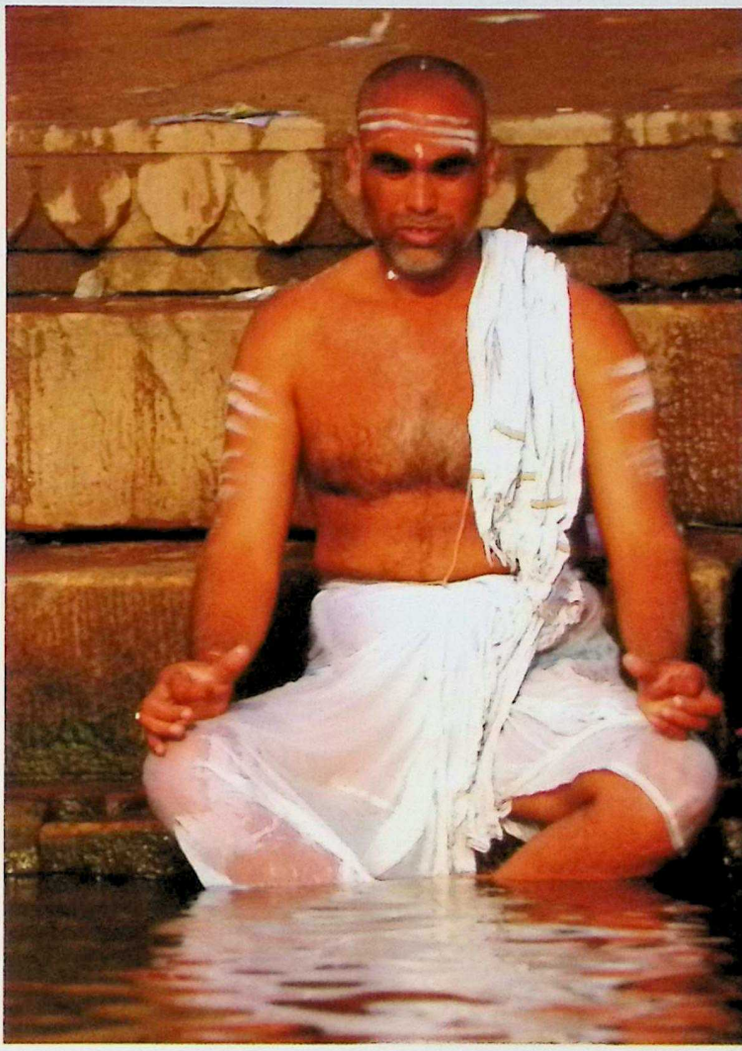

Left: Just before evening Aarti, people start gatherings around Har ki Pauri to witness the grand occasion of community worshiping the creator for the welfare of mankind.

Top: A Meditating Sadhu

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Of Historicity and Sanctity

The origin of the Kumbh dates back to the period when Gods and demons fought for the pot of amrit (nectar) for twelve consecutive nights and days, which equaled to twelve human years. It is believed that During this battle, some drops of the elixir fell on the earth at four different places in India. These sites namely: Allahabad, Haridwar, Nashik and Ujjain became four sacred spots for Kumbha mela.

People from across the globe wait for this spiritual festival. Over 5-8 million pilgrims from all over the world visit India to one of the four sacred spots where the fair is scheduled to take dip in the holy river. The observance of a sacred bath by devotees in large number with display of immense fervour and excitement makes this fair the largest religious congregation in the world.

It is believed that water of the Ganges during this Kumbh period attains unique healing touch and special powers. The devout believe that bathing in the Ganges will free one from their past sins (karma), and make them eligible for liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The most auspicious day for the holy dip at Kumbh is on the new moon day. This is the day when one gets rid of all sins and evils. The individual is also granted salvation. The festival of Kumbh is live representation of the age old adage 'faith heals and consoles.' The place turns into a paradise brimming with peace for devotees during the Kumbh. The Kumbh mela is undoubtedly the world's largest act of faith.

When did Kumbh Mela Begin?

There are no documentary records or evidences available as to when Kumbh fair originated. Some historians believe that the time and the venue were decided during the Gupta era (AD 400 - AD 600) when the Puranas were given their present shape. Some opine that the fair originated during the reign of emperor Harshavardhan (612 - 647 AD).

The first written evidence of the Kumbha Mela can be found in the accounts of famous Chinese traveller, Huein Tsang or Xuanzang (602 - 664 AD) who visited India in 629 - 645 AD, during the reign of King Harshvardhan. However, the reference to its observance dates back many centuries to ancient India's Vedic period when the river festivals were started for the first time.

Huein Tsang has given a detailed account of one such fair at Prayag, where the emperor donated all his wealth after worshipping the Buddha. He mentions that the fair used to take place after every six years. But he neither refers to it as the Kumbh nor as a festival started by Harshavardhan. Many are of the opinion that Adi Shankaracharya [in 790 AD] revived the festival as yet another means of revitalizing Hinduism. He envisaged the great assemblage of individuals as an opportunity for interaction between sages and ascetics and spreading the valuable philosophy of advaita to all over the region.

If we accept that Shankaracharya was the initiator of Kumbh mela and accede to his forming to Dasnami Sampraday, then as many as 39 Kumbh melas must have occurred during that period.

Kumbh Mela and Independence Movement

The 1857 Movement

Kumbh mela and Indian independence movement are closely associated. It all started off during the medieval period when Dasnami Sanyasis fought battles for Hindu Kings from different regions in India. The Naga sanyasi warriors organized armies for rulers of these states and

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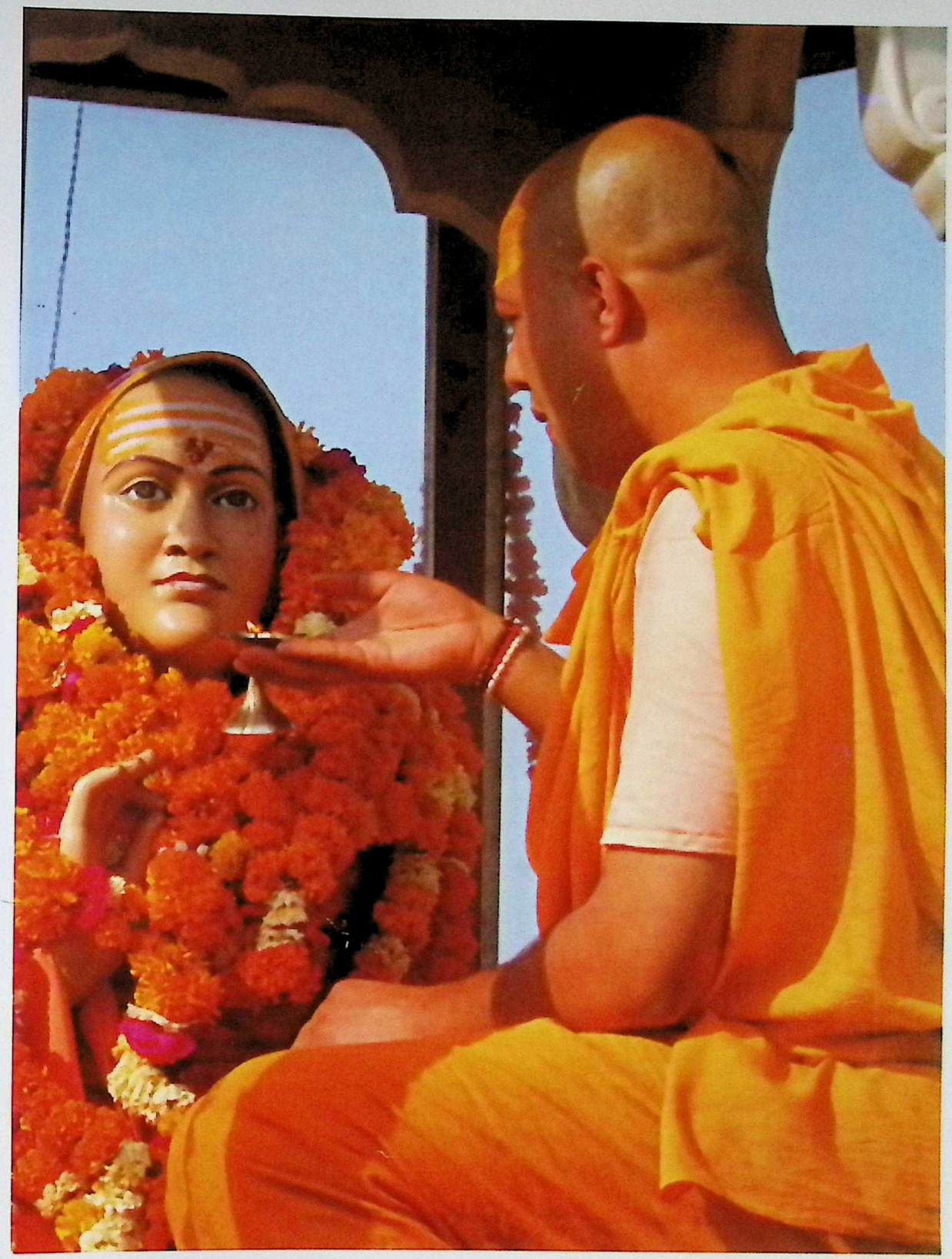

Hindu priest performing worship ritual of Shankarachary idol

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fought against the British in 1763. They also organized the eighteenth century revolution (Sanyasi Revolution) against the East India Company and assisted great freedom fighters like Jhansi Ki Rani and Tatya Tope during the 1857 A.D. freedom movement.

The Freedom Movement Meeting

The first meeting of the freedom fighters, was held in 1855 in Haridwar. It was here Swami Dayanand met Nana Saheb, Tantya Tope and Ajimullah Khan and Bahadur Shah's son Feroz Shah. More than 1500 people attended the meeting. Swami Omanand was the main inspiration behind the freedom struggle. The second meeting was headed by Swami Purnanand Sannyasi on October 5 in the same year. Third consecutive meeting was conducted on Chandi hill on October 11 wherein 195 Muslim fakirs participated with saints and freedom fighters of other religions. Kumbh mela acted as the major platform for the propagation of freedom movement.

The 1858 Attack

On January 18, 1858, nearly 1,000 freedom fighters gathered in Haridwar. The Viceroy General attacked these freedom fighters with open firing. More than 500 freedom fighters washed away in the Ganges canal.

The Banishment of Foreign Articles

On May 4, 1930, at 'Har Ki Pauri', sanyasins made bonfire of foreign articles. Bhagat Singh met Abhay Dev after killing Sannders in Lahore. It is believed that about 115 freedom fighters from this place participated in the freedom struggle between the years 1942 and 1947.

'Mahatma' title given to Gandhi in Haridwar

Swadeshi movement (Be Indian and Buy Indian) was started in 1905 by Mahatma Gandhi. On April 5, 1915, Gandhiji arrived in Haridwar. Next day, on April 6, he met Swami Shraddhanand (Mahatma Munshiram). He gave him a Manpatra (letter of appreciation). Swami Shradhhanand addressed him as 'Mahatma.' After that incident, Gandhi was called 'Mahatma' worldwide.

During his visit at Kumbh mela, Mahatma Gandhi had remarked:

"And then the Kumbh Mela arrived. It was a great moment for me. I have never tried to seek holiness or divinity as a pilgrim, but 1.7 million people cannot be hypocrites."

After visiting the Kumbh Mela of 1895, the great historian, Mark Twain, wrote: *'It is wonderful, the power of a faith like that, that can make multitudes upon multitudes of the old and weak and the young and frail enter without hesitation or complaint upon such incredible journeys and endure the resultant miseries without repining. It is done in love, or it is done in fear; I do not know which it is. No matter what the impulse is, the act born of it is beyond imagination, marvelous to our kind of people, the cold whites."*

Upcoming Kumbh Melas:

The Purna Kumbha Mela will again be held at Prayag in the year 2013.
Nasik will host the Ardha Kumbha Mela in 2015.
Ujjain Purna Kumbh Mela will be held in 2016 (Also known as Simhasth at Ujjain).

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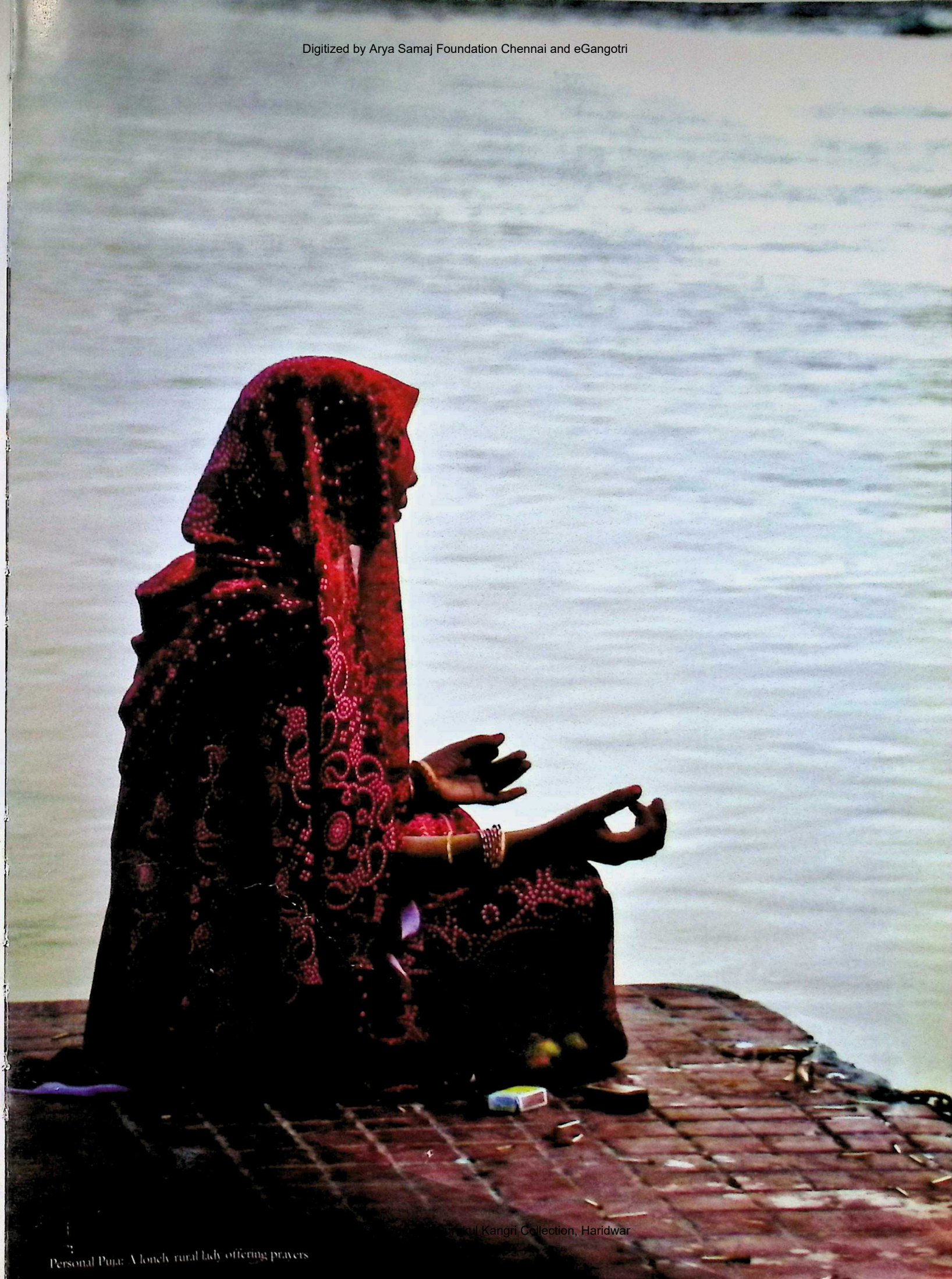

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Personal Puja: A lonely rural lady offering prayers

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कुम्भयोगे हरिद्वारे तत्र स्नानेन तत्फलम्।
नाश्वमेधसहस्रेण तत्फलं लभते भुवि।।

BY A CEREMONIAL BATH IN HOLY GANGA AT HARIDWAR DURING KUMBHA ONE ACCRUES MERIT GREATER THAN OF PERFORMING A THOUSAND HORSE SACRIFICES.

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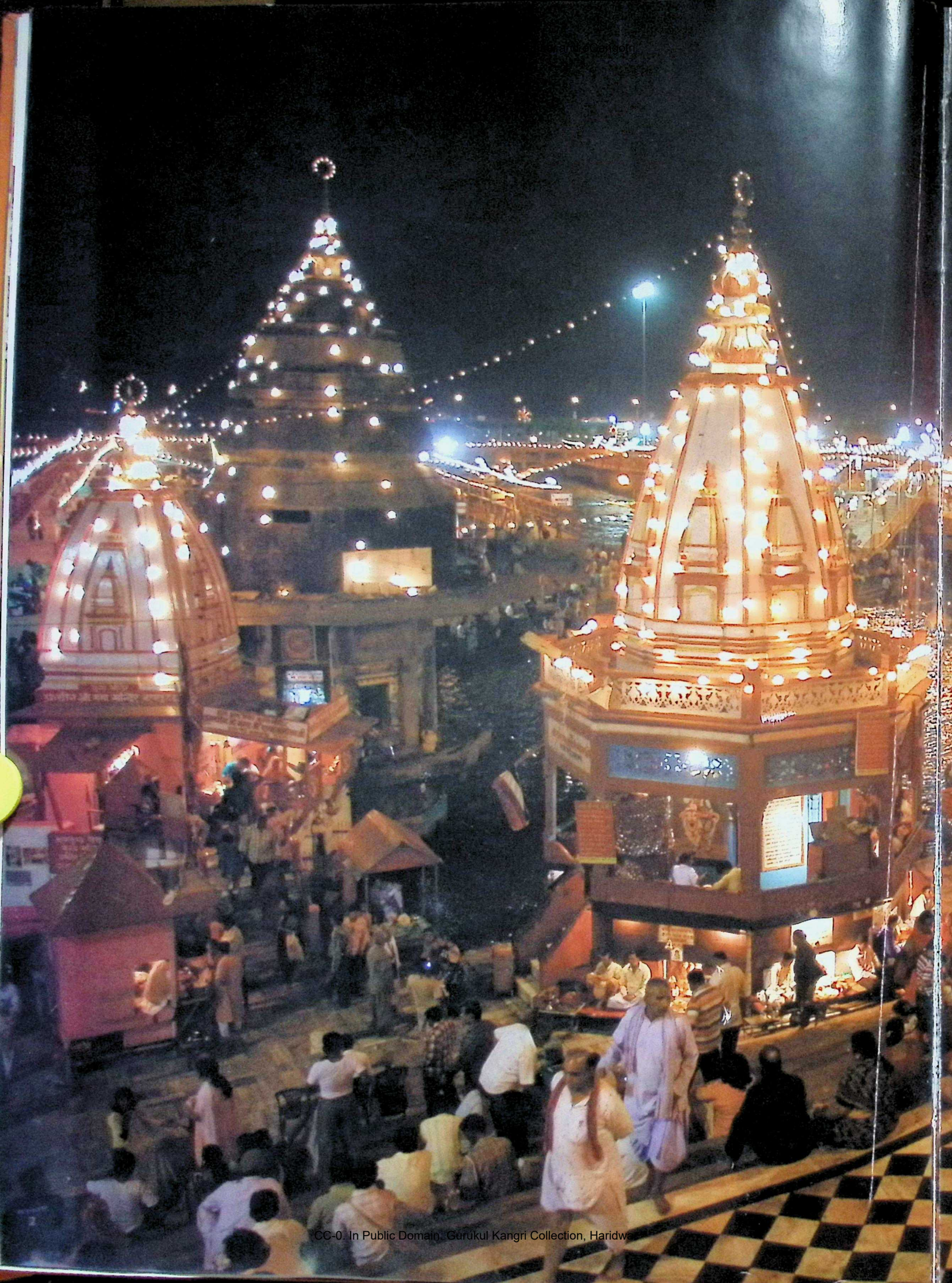

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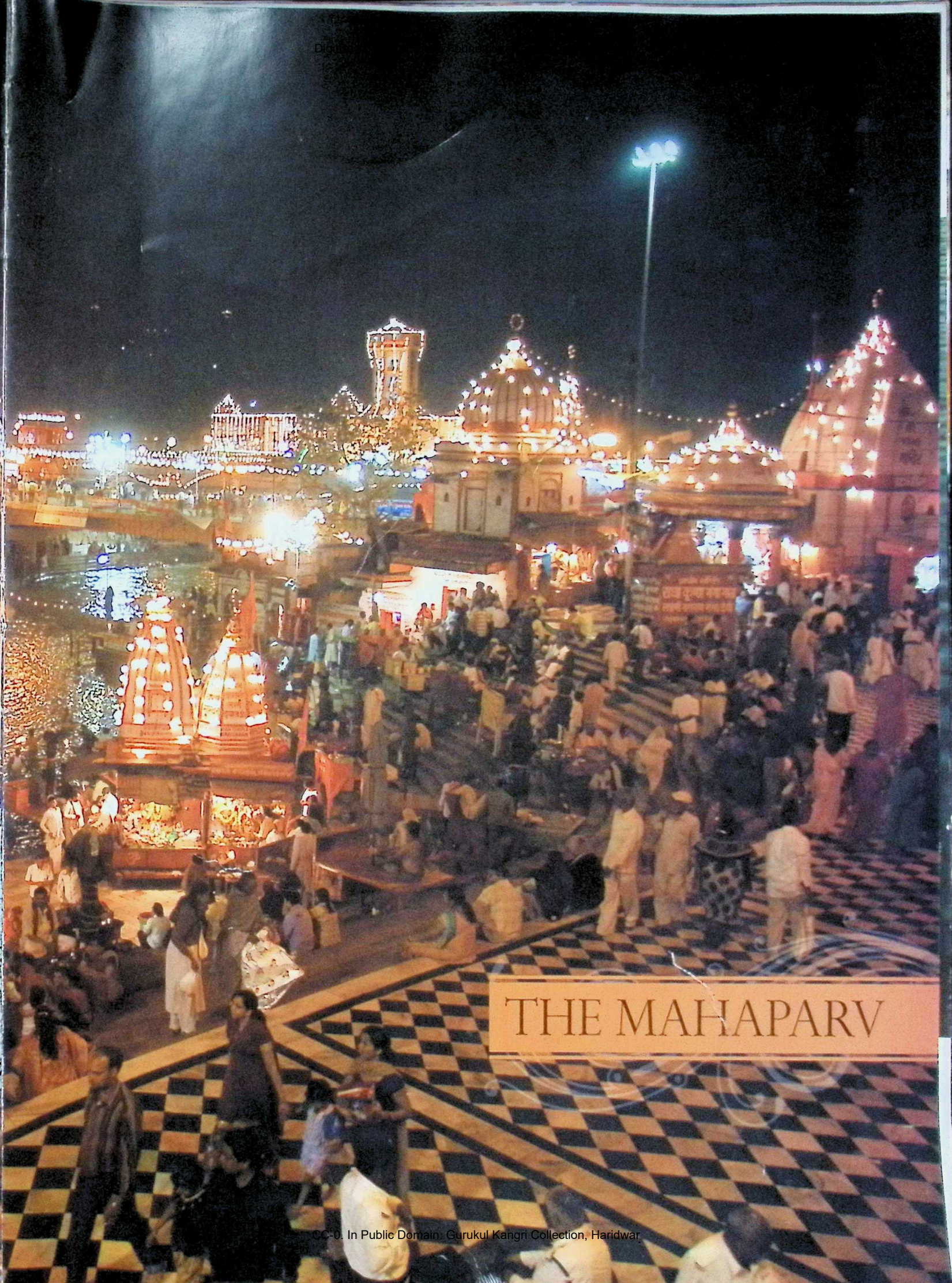

THE MAHAPARV

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Spiritual Centre of the World

"Let me call upon the inner strength I have within to open all doorways for me today; so all that I wish for or want – will easily be fulfilled."

Inner peace and happiness are not biased attributes of life. It is ubiquitous and available to everybody. But why is it that these are enjoyed by only a few? People at times find it really easy to escape from reality. This is especially true when things around are not pleasing to us or not going the way we wish to. Usually when the mind is exposed to feelings of dejection and misery for not achieving what one wanted badly, immediate relief is sought in vices like alcohol, drugs, anger, self-indulgence, violence etc. Seeking true happiness and inner strength is crucial to evade conscious indulgence in evils.

Unfortunately, inner peace is perceived as a state of feebleness and passivity. This is a wrong notion. Inner peace is not sought after only by the ascetics and sages. It is possible to lead a normal life, just as everyone around but at the same time revel in a state of inner peace and strength that cannot be intercepted by external conditions.

The hectic lifestyle and busy schedules maintained by individuals across the globe these days have deprived them from peace of mind, inner strength and everlasting happiness. Luckily there are some genuine and highly effective ways to attain internal harmony and strength.

Kumbha Mela – The Centre for Finding Peace

It is with this aim of finding peace that masses gather at Kumbh mela, participate collectively in yajna rituals reciting Vedic mantras. They come here to celebrate, enjoy and experience the much sought-after eternal peace. Most of the mantras end with *'May all get peace', recited as OM Shantih Shantih Shantih'.*

The Significant Symbols of Hindu Religion

The Hindu religious symbols contribute an abstruse representation of God. These are closer to the ideal as they form a bridge between the Formless and the mind that expects a form.

Om - Aum or Om is one of the most sacred symbols in Hinduism. In Sanskrit it is known as pranava meaning "to sound out loudly" or omkāra "om syllable." This symbol is comprised of three syllables put into one. OM is characteristically written as AUM. Repetition of symbol 'OM' orally generates high energy vibrations and takes consciousness of the practitioner high above into the universe. This facilitates the practitioner to connect with the energy of the divine. It brings in celestial peace and calm.

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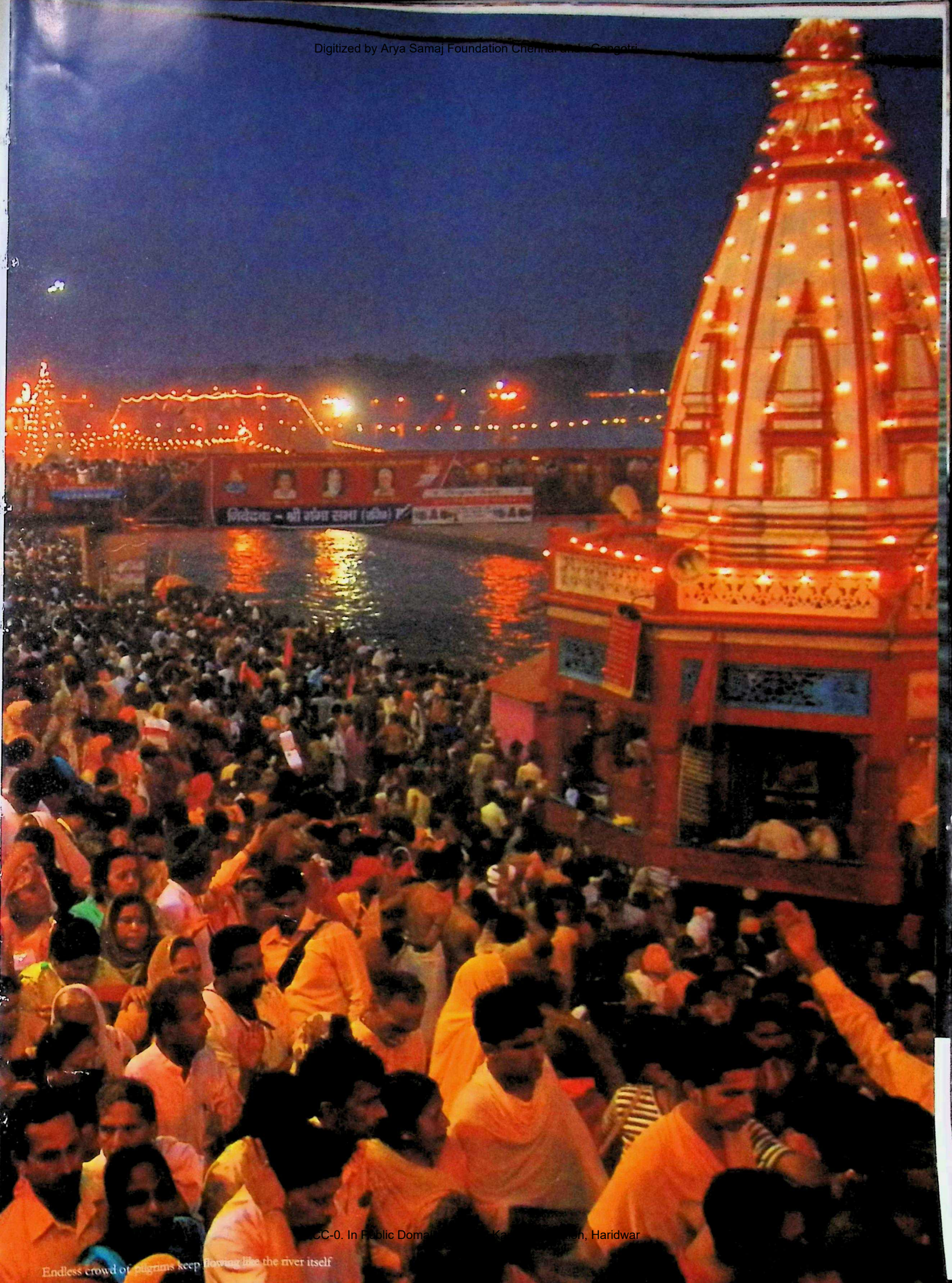

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Endless crowd of pilgrims keep flowing like the river itself

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A panoramic view of Har Ki Pauri during main bathing days

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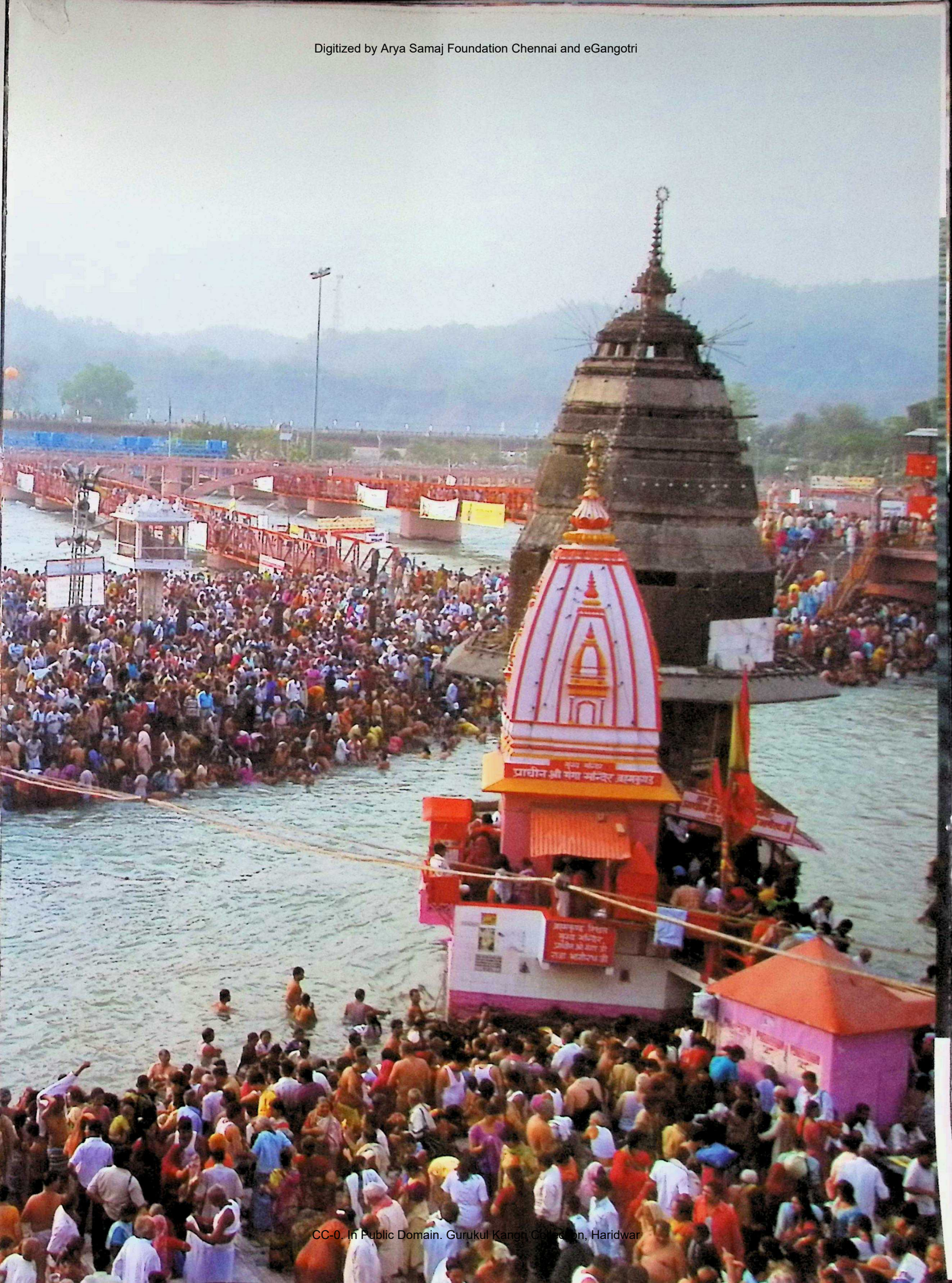

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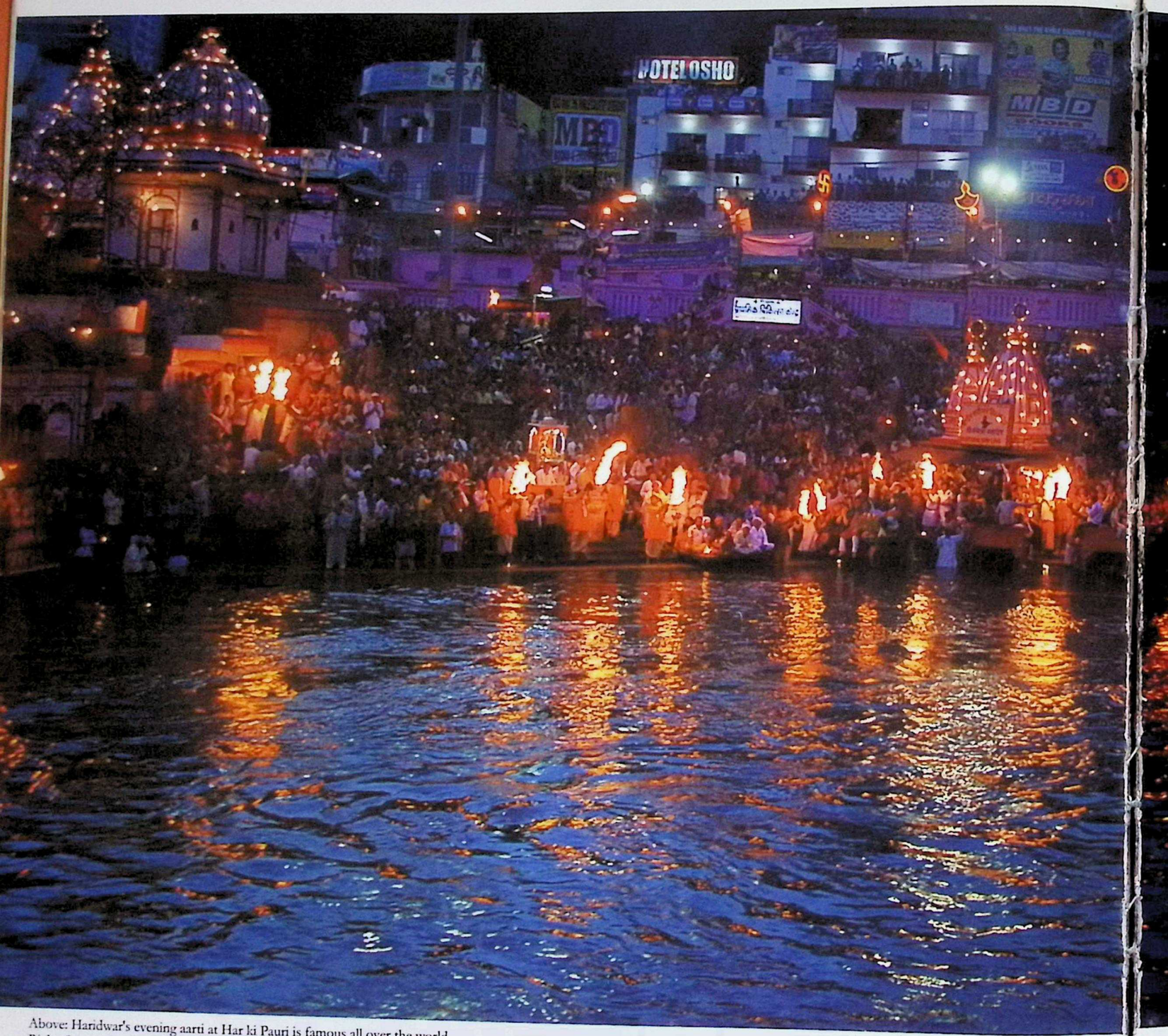

Above: Haridwar's evening aarti at Har ki Pauri is famous all over the world
Right: Surya Namaskar- A vedic way to respect nature

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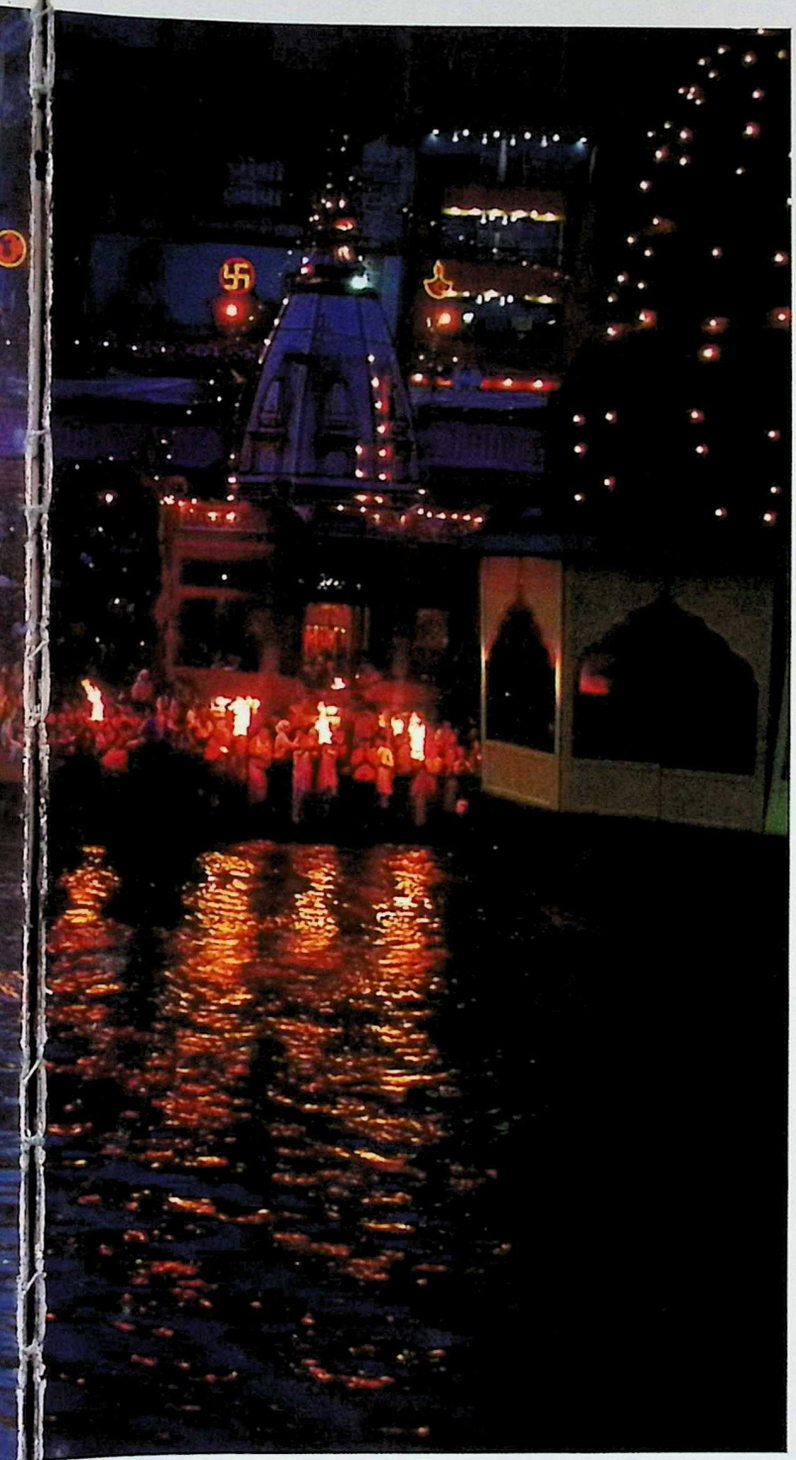

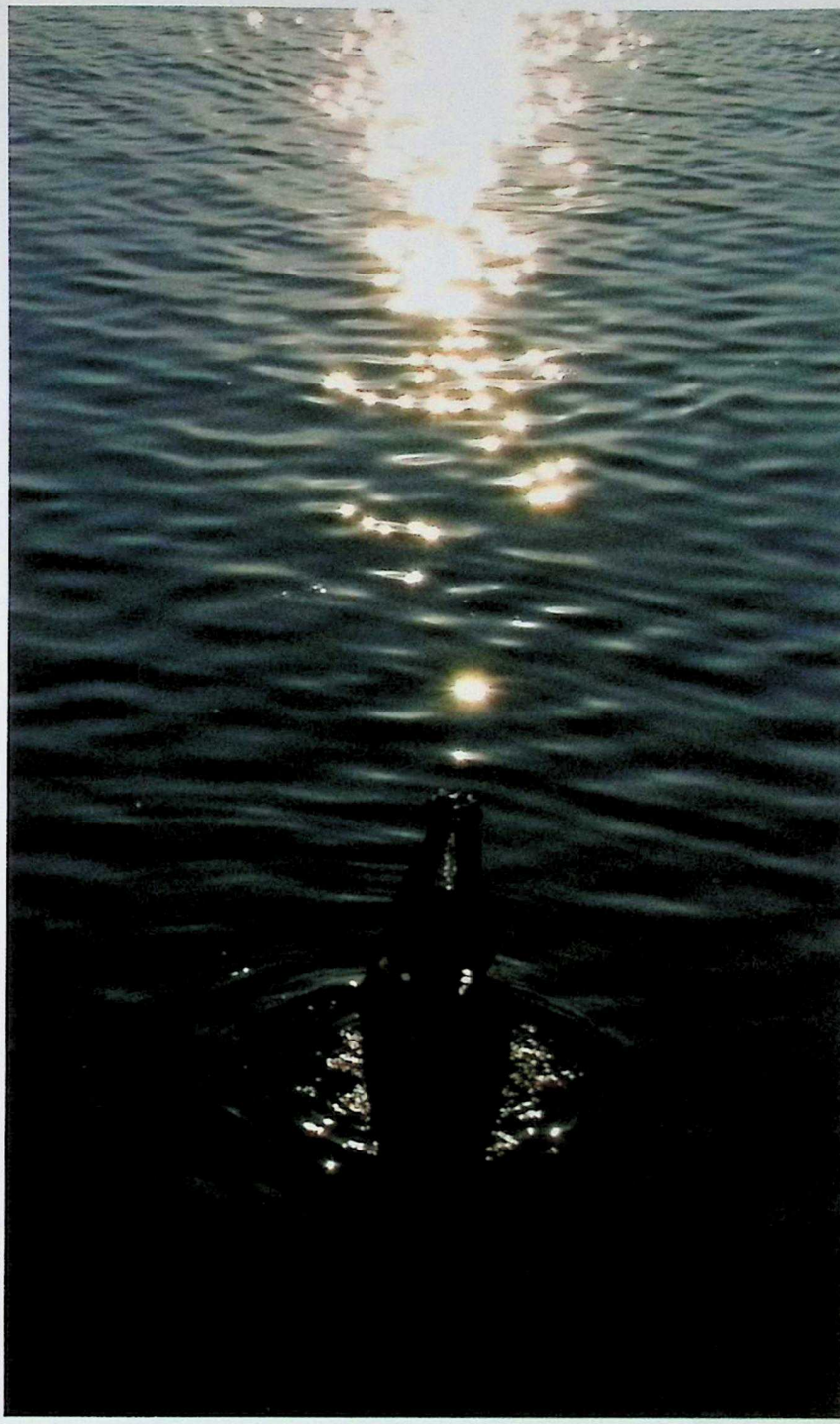

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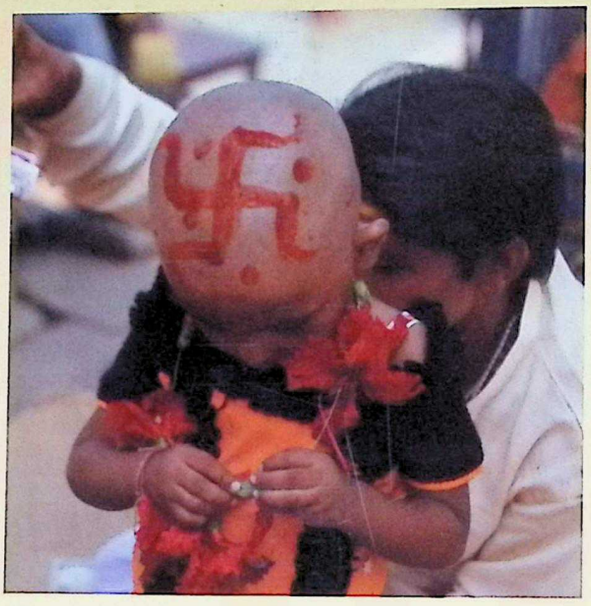

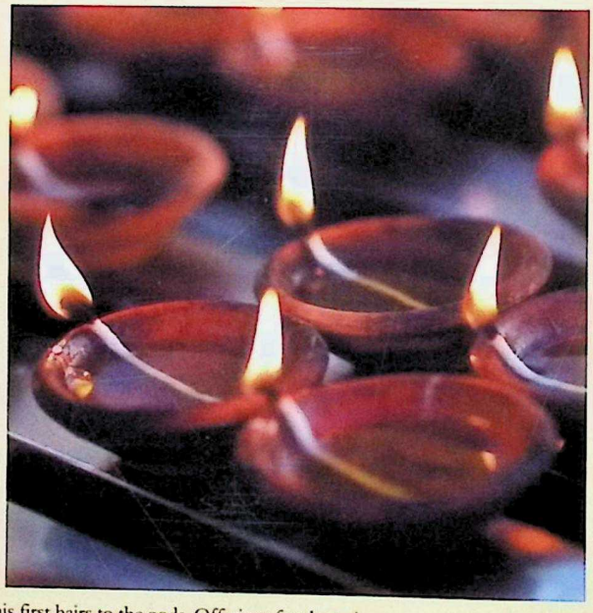

Top (Clockwise): Lockets on Sale. A kid after his head was shaved to offer his first hairs to the gods. Offerings for the puja.
Religious and earthen lamps filled with mustard oil that ace flown in the holy river.
Right: Public display of faith like this is a common sight in the holy city.

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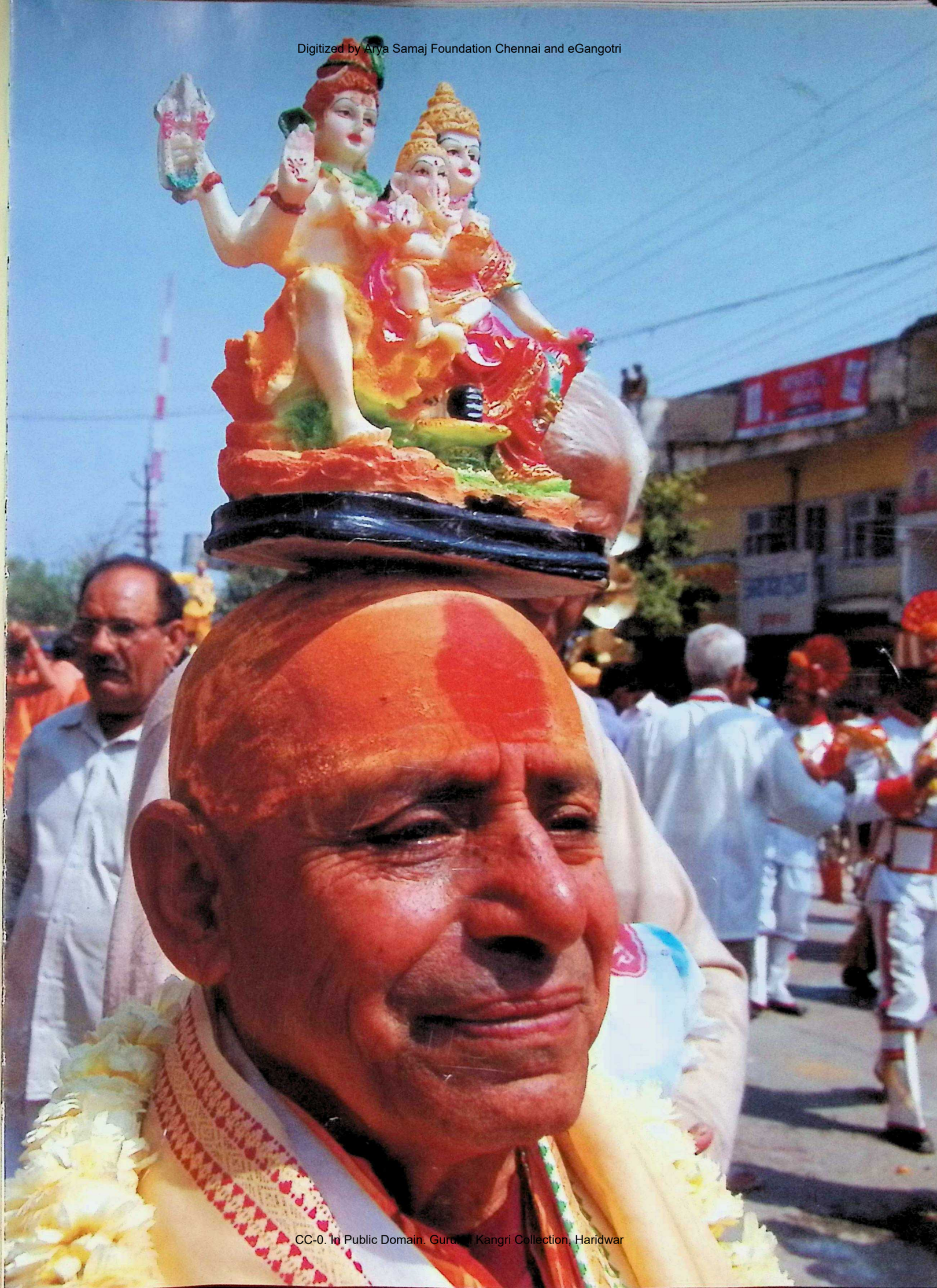

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Swastika: The Holy Symbol - For many centuries Swastika has been an auspicious symbol in India and continues to be in common use. The Swastika (from Sanskrit svástika) is an equilateral cross with its arms bent at right angles, in either right-facing form or its mirrored left-facing form and pointing in all four directions (north, east, south and west). This signifies a grounded stability and is intended to represent inner peace and good luck.

Lotus - The lotus flower has its roots in the muddy waters, but it blooms above the water without becoming dirty by the mire below. It is a natural symbol for the person seeking release or moksha (to live without worldly attachments). The lotus also represents 'chakras' or centers of consciousness in the body and is widely referred to as the flower for inner peace.

Bindi : The Vermilion Mark - It is one of the most common symbols in Hinduism, a colored red vermilion (kumkum) dot placed on the forehead by Hindu women and men. It symbolizes the female energy and is believed to protect from evil. The area between the eyebrows (where the bindi is placed) is said to be the sixth chakra Ajna, the exit point for kundalini energy and the seat of 'concealed wisdom'. The bindi retains energy and strengthens concentration. It also works towards calming the ego and helps promote inner peace.

Janeyoo (The Sacred Thread) - When a young Hindu undergoes the Upanayana ritual, a yellow and thin thread running from left shoulder to the waist is Yajnopavita is given to him. The twig in the right hand (usually from peepal tree) signifies his entry into Brahmacharya phase of life. It is also a representation of their spiritual awakening and acceptance as a religious student. The thread helps the individual dwell in peace at home and outside.

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Above(Clockwise): Puja utensils. Lord Ganesha in a locket to remove obstacles in the life. Young Lady getting blessings at a temple.

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Religious groups worshiping banks of Ganges since time immemorial.

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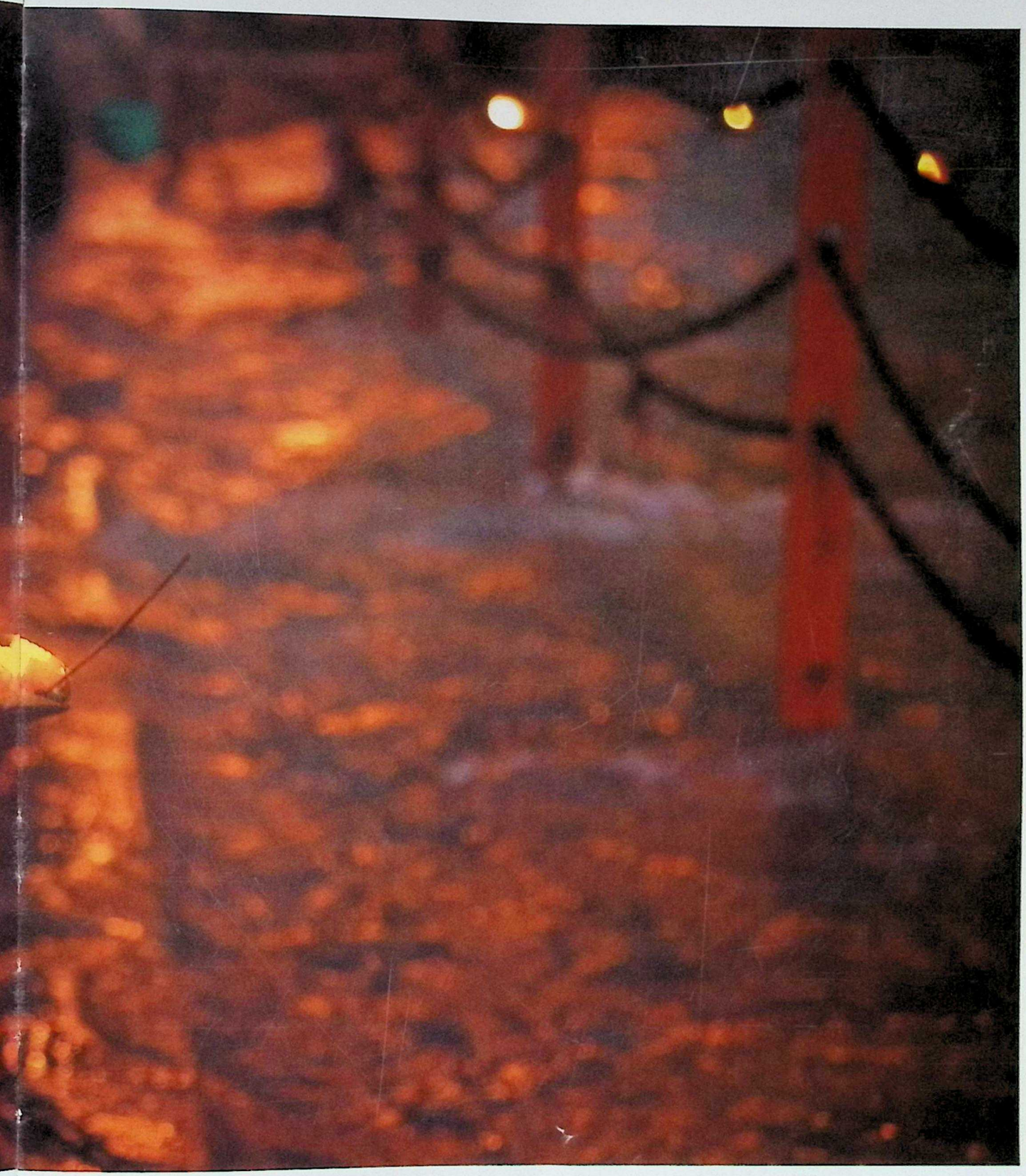

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Shanti Mantras (Mantras for Peace)

Shanti Mantras also known as peace mantras are prayers for peace quoted in Vedas and Upanishads in the Hindu Mythology. These mantras are believed to cool the mind of reciter and bring peace to the surroundings. Reciting these mantras at the beginning of any task is considered to remove its obstacles.

Shanti Mantras always end with three words of 'Shanti' which suggests 'Peace.' The reason behind speaking three times 'Shanti' is to cool the surroundings and pacify the troubles in three realms namely; "Physical" or Adhi-Bhautika, "Divine" or Adhi-Daivika and "Internal" or Adhyaatmika.

Shanti Mantra 1:

"Om Asato Maa Sadgamaya,
Tamaso Maa Jyotir Gamaya,
Mrityor Maa Amritam Gamaya,
Om Shantih, Shantih, Shantih."

Meaning: "OM lead me from unreal to real, lead me from darkness to light, lead me from death to immortality, lead me from turmoil to peace OM Peace, Peace, Peace."

Shanti Mantra 2:

In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and Ishavasya Upanishad, the mantra is recited as:

"Om Poornamadah Poornamidam Poornat Poornamudachyate,
Poornasya Poornamaadaya Poornamevavashishyate,
Om Shantih, Shantih, Shantih."

Meaning: "That is Absolute, This is Absolute, Absolute arises out of Absolute, If Absolute is taken away from Absolute, Absolute remains, Only Peace remains."

Shanti Mantra 3:

From Taittiriya Upanishad, Katha Upanishad and Shvetashvatara Upanishad:

"Om Sahanaa Vavatu Sahanau Bhunaktu,
Saha Veeryam Karavaavahai,
Tejasvi Naavadheetamastu Maa Vidvishaavahai,
Om Shantih Shantih Shantih."

Meaning: The literal meaning of this mantra is: "OM. Let all of us protect each other together, may all of us enjoy together, may all of us work together and let our study become radiant. Let there be no hatred between us, Let there be Peace, Peace, Peace."

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Religious heads after a grand puja and Yajna for world peace.

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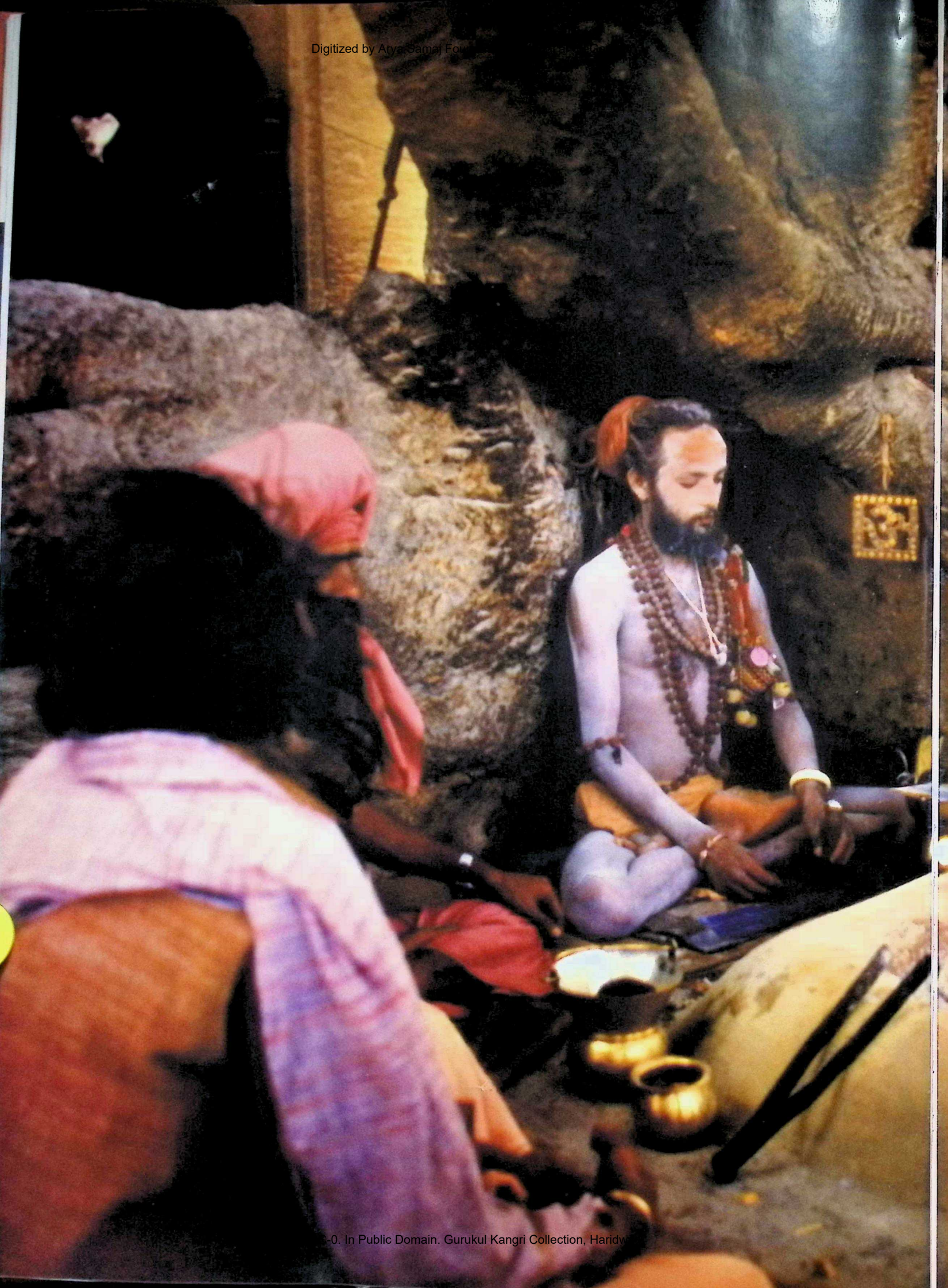

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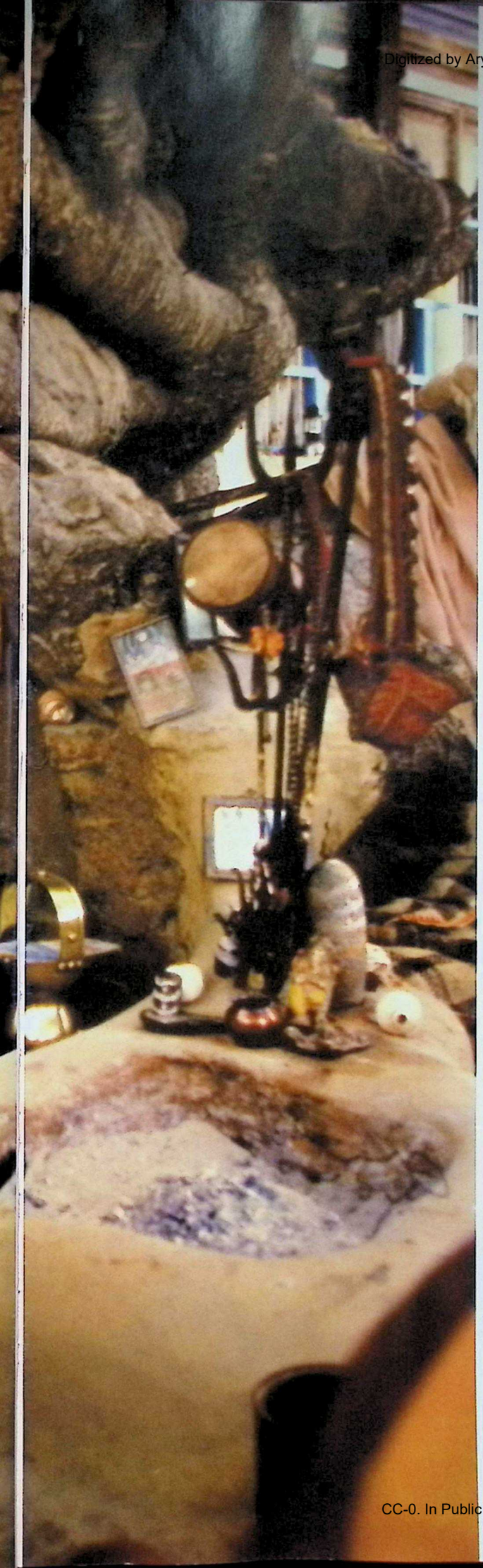

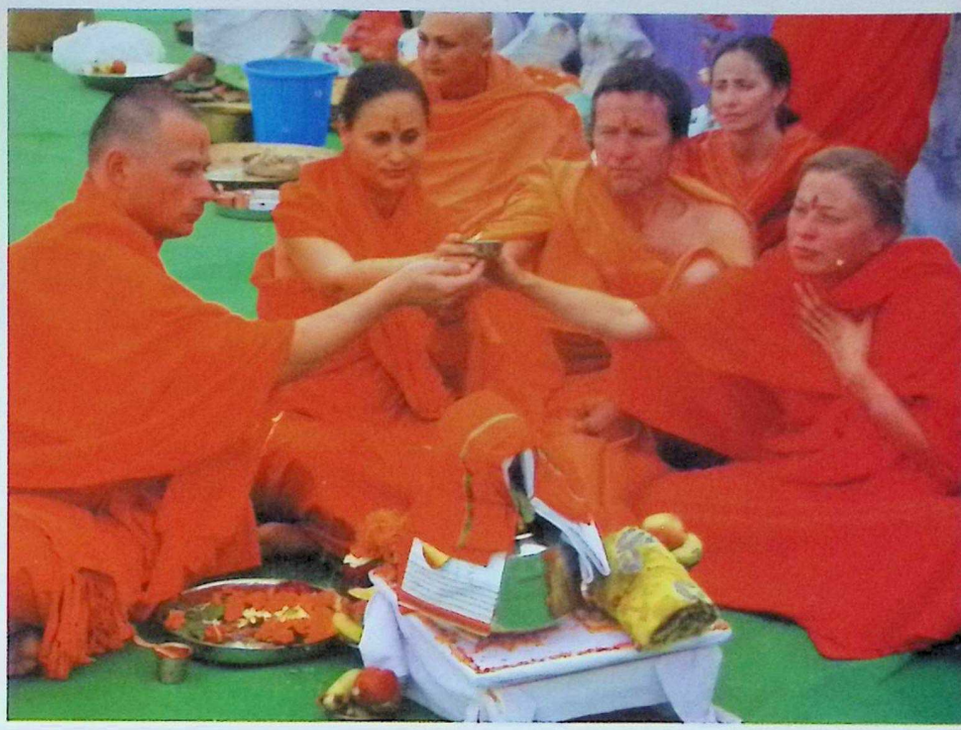

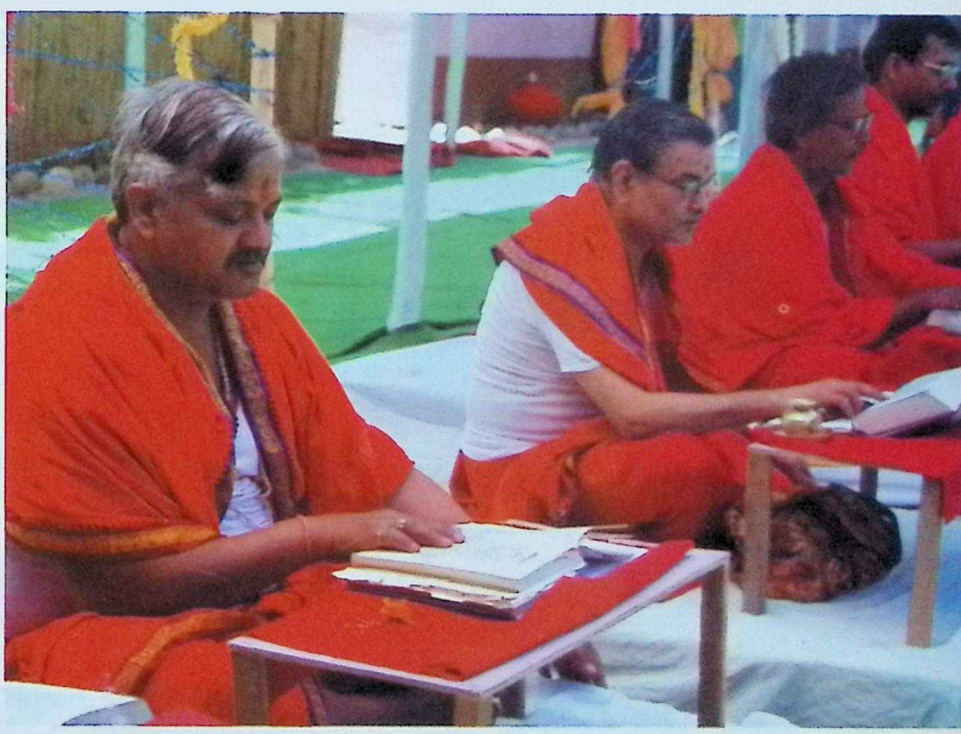

Left: Even individual sadhus have a great following. One such saint sitting beneath a tree performing secret sites with his assistants.
Top: Ukrainians taking family Sanyas at an ashram and (below) Sadhus studying rare scriptures to find new meanings
Above: Scriptural knowledge to spiritual seekers.

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Significance of Kumbh Mela

Kumbh mela is the single largest religious congregation on earth where people gather in quest for peace and immortality. It can also be referred to as the largest human gathering of any kind known to man wherein saints, ascetics, householders, men and women come with a spirit of pilgrimage seeking inner peace. The Kumbh mela has become a central point for people from multi religious backgrounds the world over. Surprisingly, people from western countries who are used to lavish life style, have adopted the Hindu way of life with much ease at the Kumbh mela camp held in Malviya Dweep and Gaurishankar Dweep of Kumbh Nagar.

If India is forehead of the world, being blessed by Nature and Gods, then Uttarakhand is indeed the shining vermillion mark on it. With the grand Himalayan Mountains and the pristine rivers like Ganga flowing through it, the state enjoys natural splendor drawing spiritualists and peace lovers from all over the world. The fairs and festivals organized along the banks of the Ganges are a major attraction for all tourists.

What is Family Sanyasa Diksha?

The family Sanyasa facilitates one to contribute their best to the world and worldly things. The practice evokes a feeling of peace and tranquility within oneself and makes their life easy. For instance, walking on the path that leads to workplace generates thoughts of stress and anxiety. On the contrary, walking early in the morning on a Sunday is devoid of any stress and related feelings. The key is to balance work and family life with ease. You must love your children, wife, loved ones and to yourself. This is Family Sanyasa. This sanyasa has descended from the ancient spiritual culture of India existing since the period of creation of Vedanta, Upanishad, Purana and other epics. The tradition of family Sanyasi was followed by great sages in the past including Maharishi Vyasa, Bhardwaj, Atri, Anusuya, Pulatsya, Gautam, Karad, Vashishtha, Bhrigu Rishi and many thousands of sages. Then why not today?

Family Sanyas Diksha for Peace at Pilot Baba's Camp

It was unique awesome sight, appalling for some. I, being an Indian, felt little absurd smelling purified gobar (cowdung) used in sannyasa ritual but many foreigners who were being initiated, sat with closed eyes, with smile of bliss on their face, as if experiencing trance. They were performing Vedic rituals as directed by their initiator in Pilot Baba camp. I stood agape.

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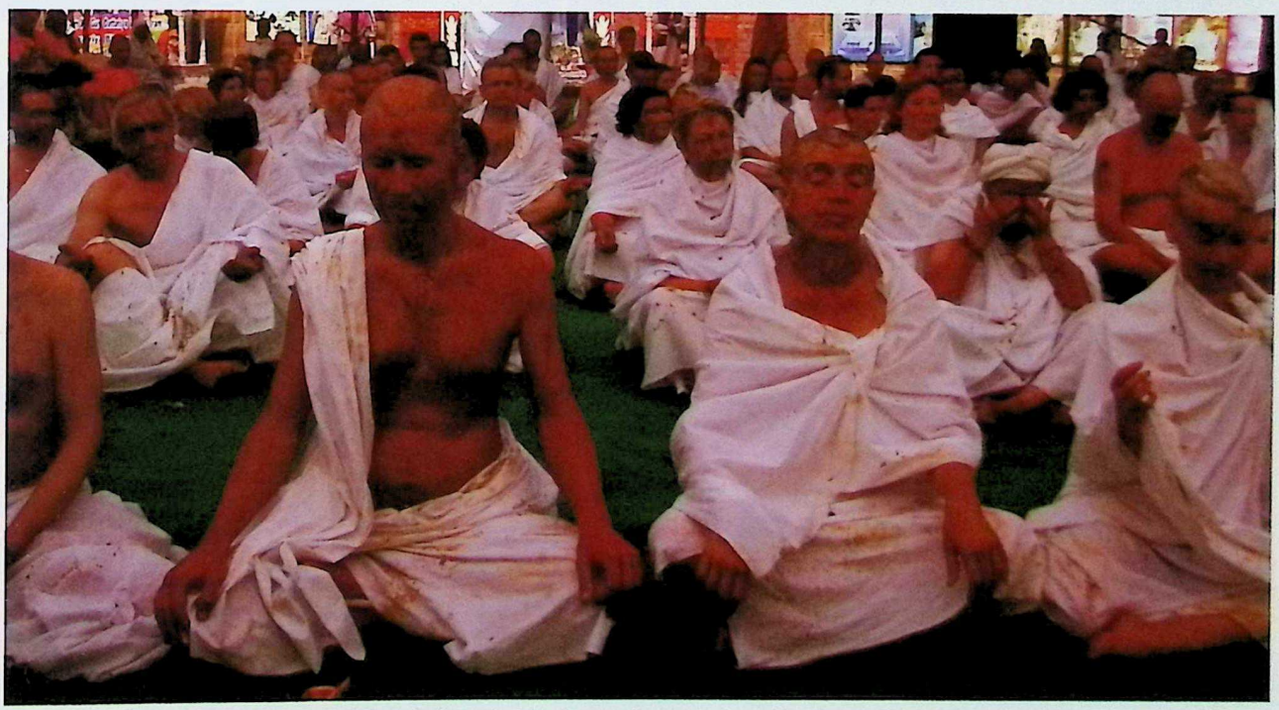

Top: Visiting pilgrims taking part in a puja and another group of Russians taking sanyas at an ashram.
Above: 101 Ukrainians take family sanyas diksha

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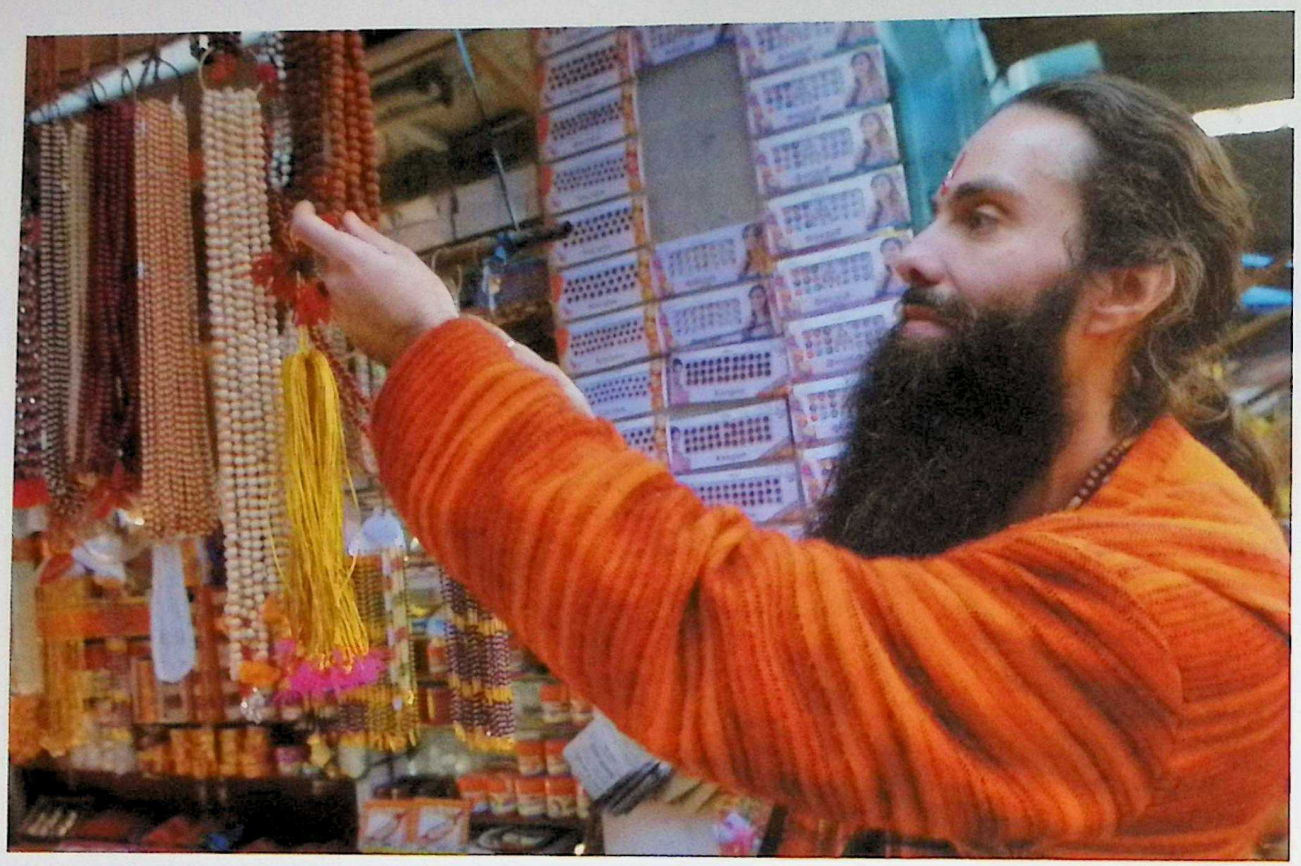

Top: A young sadhu selects rosaries at a shop
Above: Various devotees performing Yajna to attain peace.

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A sadhu blesses a foreigner devotee

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Nearly a hundred disciples of Pilot Baba got the initiation into Hindu culture on March 19. Women and men dressed in sparkling white robes sat on the floor. The efficiency with which they performed the traditional Indian vedic rituals failed to reveal that they were non-Indians. Since most of them hailed from Russia and Ukraine, the mantra rituals were translated by Russian interpreter, Ranganath Giri. Rounds of offerings by the newly initiated foreigners went on for an hour, which included 'panch gavya', 'mauli'(sacred thread), 'haldi', 'chandan' and other sanctified materials. Some of these materials were applied on robes and most of them on hands and face following a specific chronology."We are transformed today!" This was the general expression echoed by all disciples. "Most of them were initiated into 'family sanyasa diksha' and a few into 'complete sanyasa diksha' but all will carry the 'morality code' of India when they go back from here to their respective places," told Pilot Baba, who has international followings worldwide.

The mankind in today's world riveted in clutches of war, poverty, hunger, unabashed consumerism, terrorism and ill health, finds its solutions at such magnanimous fairs. No wonder millions gather without any invitation or advertisements.

A Caravan of Peace Activists

That was a rare sight at Kumbh mela 2010. A caravan of peace activists drawn from different parts of the country visited the Kumbh. Some of them wore muslim skullcaps and met sadhus in their tents along with their Hindu brothers. Some muslim tourists admitted to the fact that they got a chance to know about the Hindu culture and religion with a common goal described in both the religions as attaining inner peace. Human values remain the same whether talked by a Hindu or a Zoroastrian or a Muslim.

Yog Mata Keiko Aikawa hailing from Yamanshi Japan fondly called by her devotees as Ma Keila Devi expressed her sole motive on earth as being a messenger of peace and divine love. She is the daughter of one of the richest advocates and politicians. Regardless of her capacity to spend life enjoying the luxuries and wealth, she chose the divine path.

"The urge, the enchantment, the pull of divine love is so great that worldly pleasures seem too insignificant," says Yog Mata.

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Top: A group of Nepalese saints worshipping near the Ganges
Above: A unique group of sadhus from Punjab.

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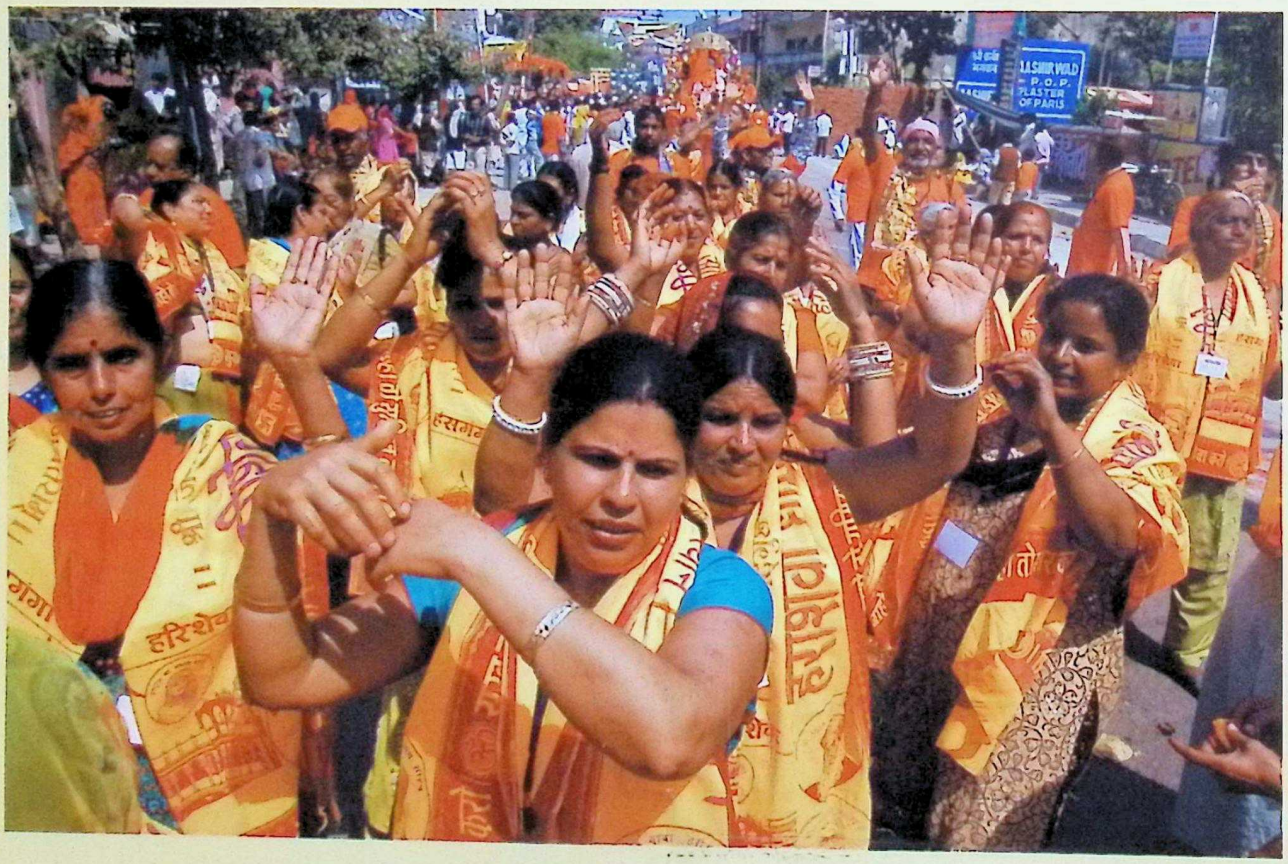

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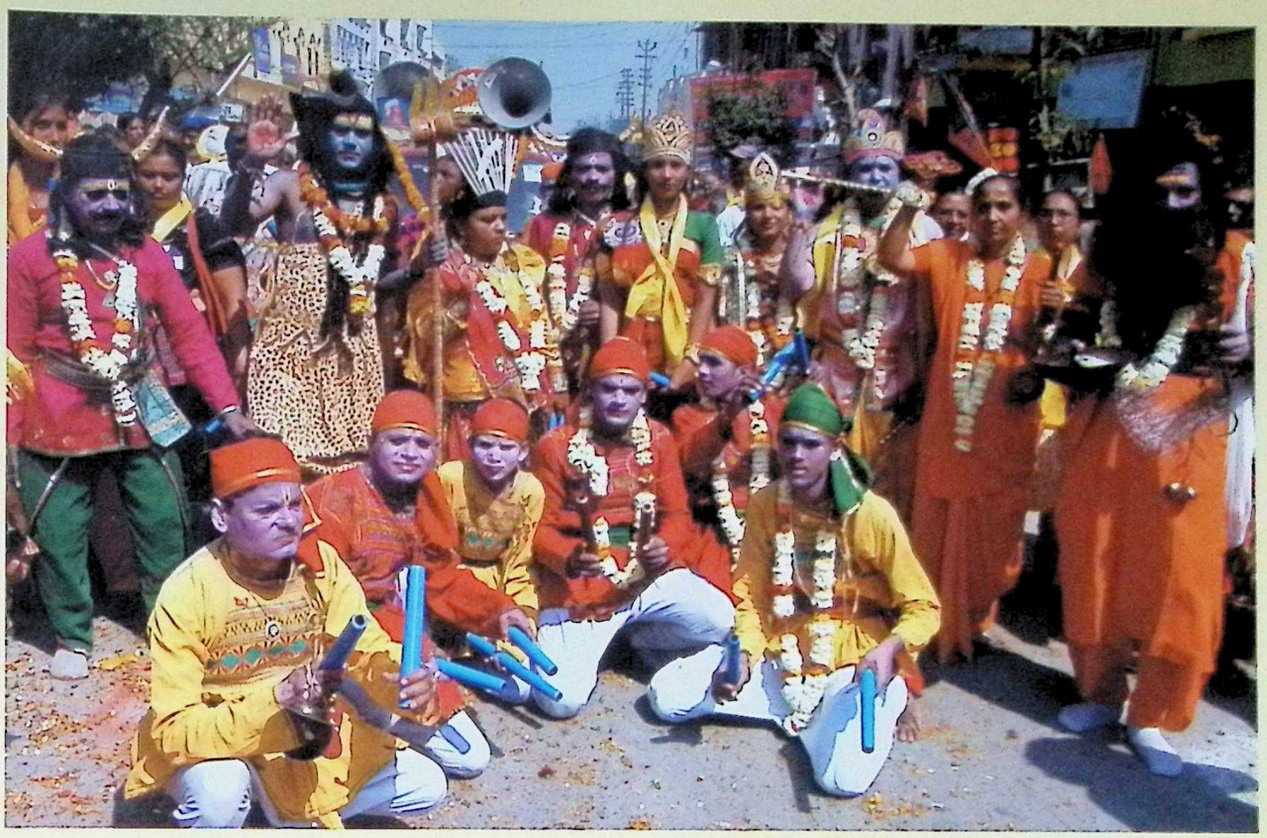

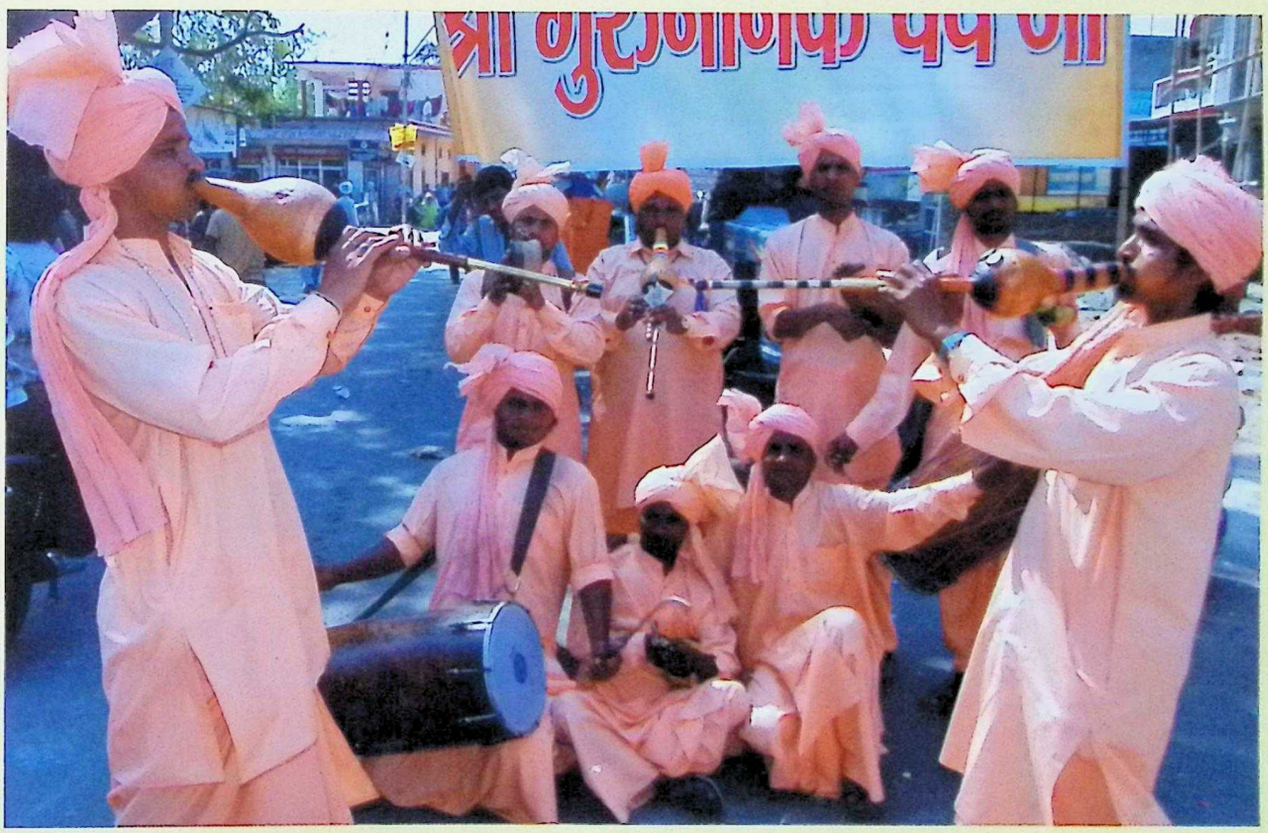

Various cultural groups also take part during the Kumbh festival

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Ukrainian Couple Gets Married as per Hindu Customs

Kumbh Mela also beckoned diversity of Indian culture and religion. A Ukrainian couple got married again, at Pilot Baba's camp, as per Hindu traditions. The wedding was solemnized at the Neel Dhara base camp of Pilot Baba and had all the ingredients of a Hindu marriage. From 'palki' (palanquin) to 'pandit' (priest), each ritual of a Hindu marriage was followed.

Darin and Alina, the couple, dressed in a traditional saree and a sherwani, were ecstatic at getting married as per the Hindu traditions. Dressed in Indian bridal lehenga (flair gown) the bride was carried in a palanquin to the ritual place. Foreigners, especially from the erstwhile USSR countries, were seen dancing to the tunes of Hindi film songs.

Incredible India! A Special Encounter with a German Writer

"24 years have passed but the feeling at the Kumbh is the same," says Maria Wirth.

Attending the Kumbh in Haridwar transports the German writer, Maria Wirth to a world of nostalgia. It was almost 24 years she had first visited the place to cover Kumbh for a German magazine. At that time, she had been in the thick of it and even took a dip at "Har Ki Pauri" on the most auspicious night in April. Coincidentally, it was the day when 55 people had died in the grand fair due to a stampede.

'When I shared my article and photographs published 24 years ago, with a young French photographer yesterday, his reaction was that Kumbh mela must have been so different at that time. But actually the feeling of the Kumbh is the same" said Maria.

Eccentric sadhus and sages with peculiar austerities, the eagerness to take a dip in the holy Ganga, the strong devotion and laudable sincerity of pilgrims have not changed, feels the German lady.

"I went around the camps and met a sadhu with an arm raised upwards since 32 years. He was Amaravati Maharaj from Kullu Valley. I showed him an old photograph of a sadhu also with his arm raised. Was it him? The sadhu denied after having a close look at the picture. He said that the picture was of Sitaram Baba," explained Maria to me. I was fascinated to see a German national overwhelmed and enchanted with the aura of Indian culture and its varied aspects.

'Haridwar has grown with fancy buildings. Many rooms have air conditioners now, but in some ways it is just the same. Sitaram Baba may have been replaced by Amaravati, I have grown older from 36 to 60 years but the inner feeling has not changed. The tradition goes on," mentioned Maria with a smile.

Another thing which astonished this German writer was the willingness of people in India to live without much desire and still stay contented.

"A steady flow of pilgrims enters Haridwar, but most of them don't look for a hotel. They just look for a place at the banks of the Ganga to spread some cloth," she was amazed. During her morning dip on the ghats, she met a group of people from West Bengal who had spent the night at the river bank.

'Was it difficult?" she asked them. One of them answered immediately, *"No problem!"* When she pointed to their thin shawls, he smilingly acknowledged, *'Little problem."* Then he beamed a big smile, *'India mein bahut ananda hai (There is much bliss in India)."*

Drawing a comparison between westerners and Indians, Maria said, *'I don't think such a mammoth gathering could take place so peacefully in Europe. Even the chillum rounds taken by the akhara sadhus are so different from the western hippies. Perhaps westerners use it to give freedom to the senses and sadhus use it to control the senses."*

'The advertisement is right: India is really incredible!" the writer added.

"The poor long for riches, the rich long for heaven, but the wise long for a state of tranquility" - Swami Rama.

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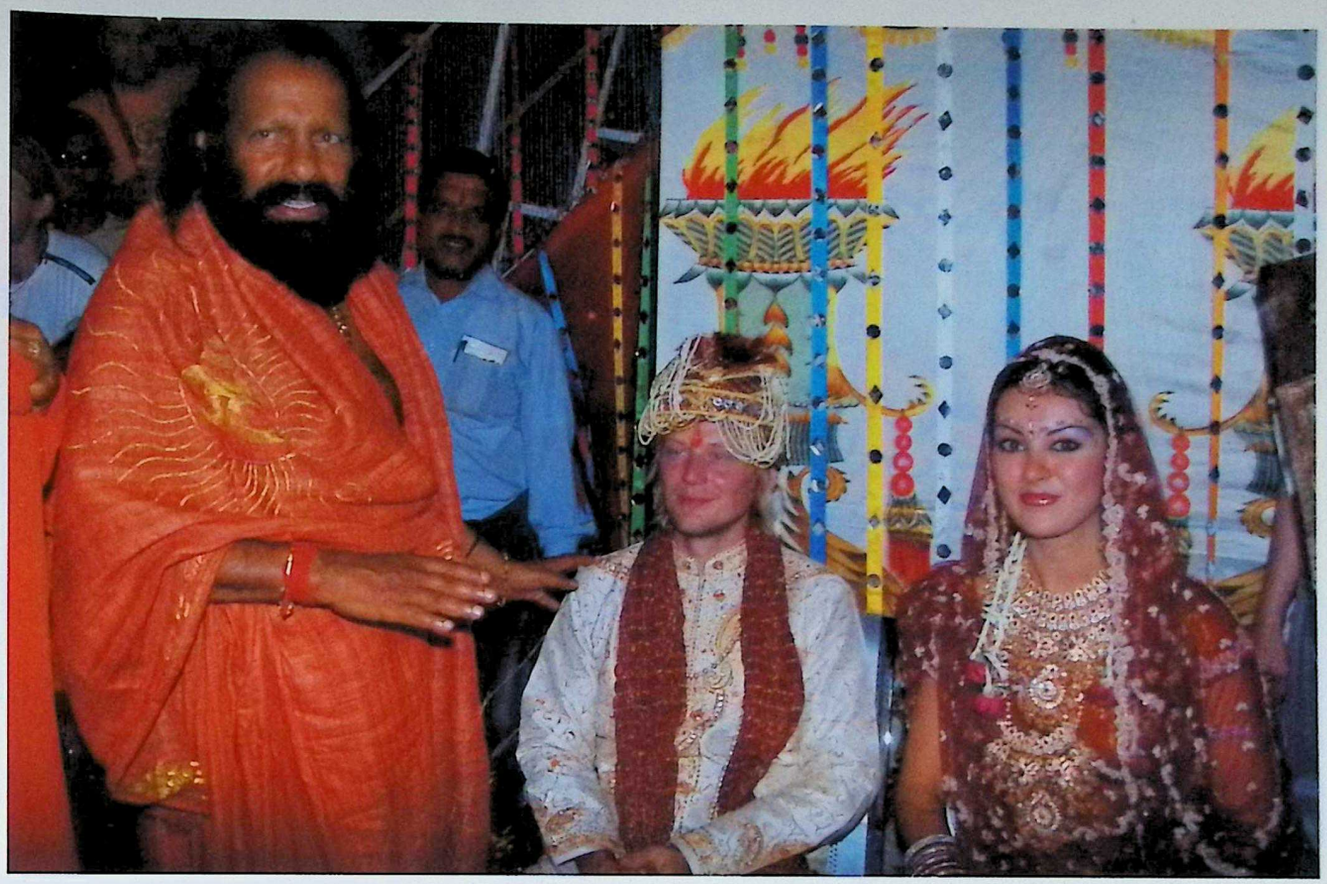

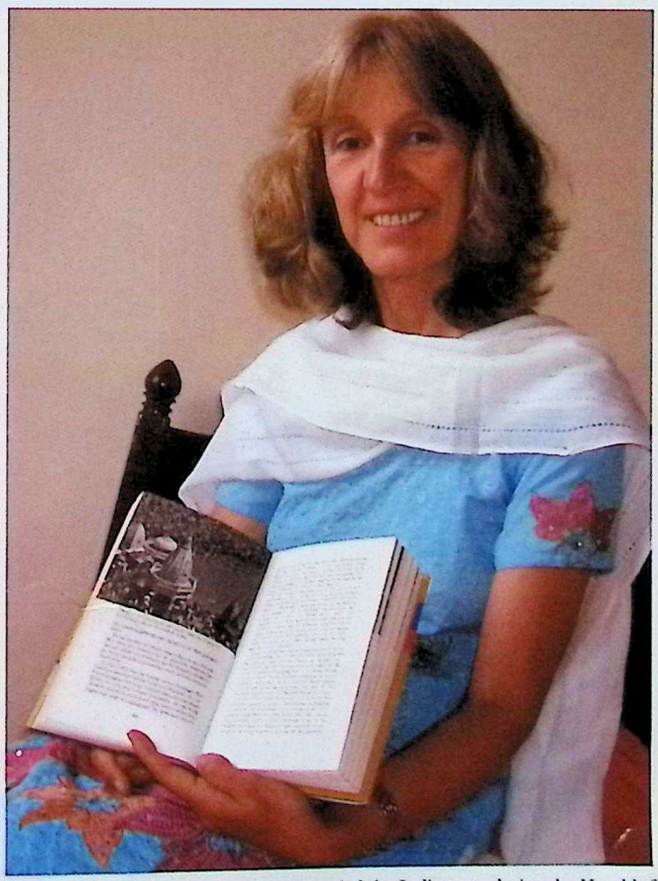

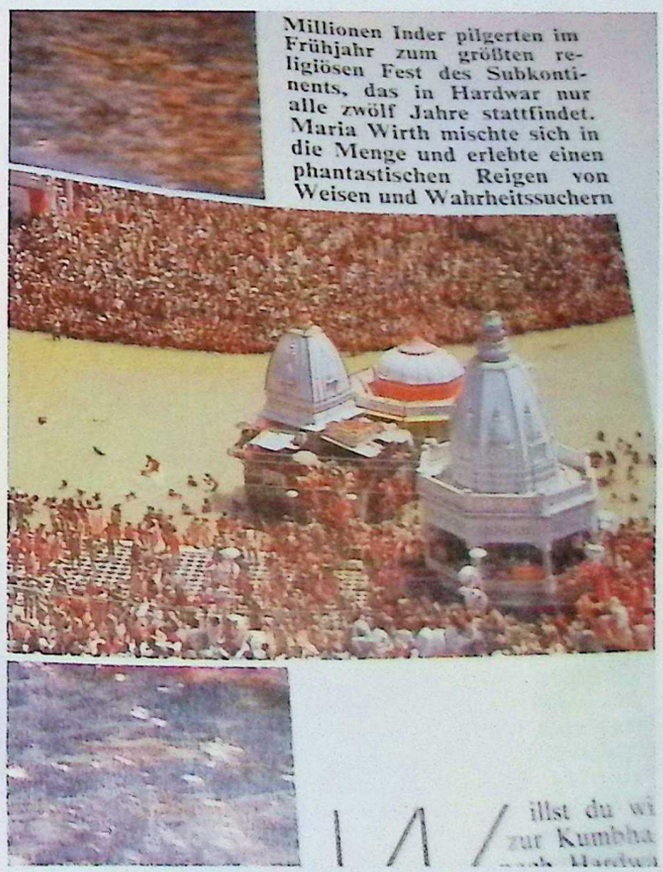

Millionen Inder pilgerten im Frühjahr zum größten religiösen Fest des Subkontinents, das in Hardwar nur alle zwölf Jahre stattfindet. Maria Wirth mischte sich in die Menge und erlebte einen phantastischen Reigen von Weisen und Wahrheitssuchern

illst du wi
zur Kumbha

Top: Countless foreign devotees got married the Indian way during the Kumbh festival
Above: Maria Wirth with her book on India and its festivals

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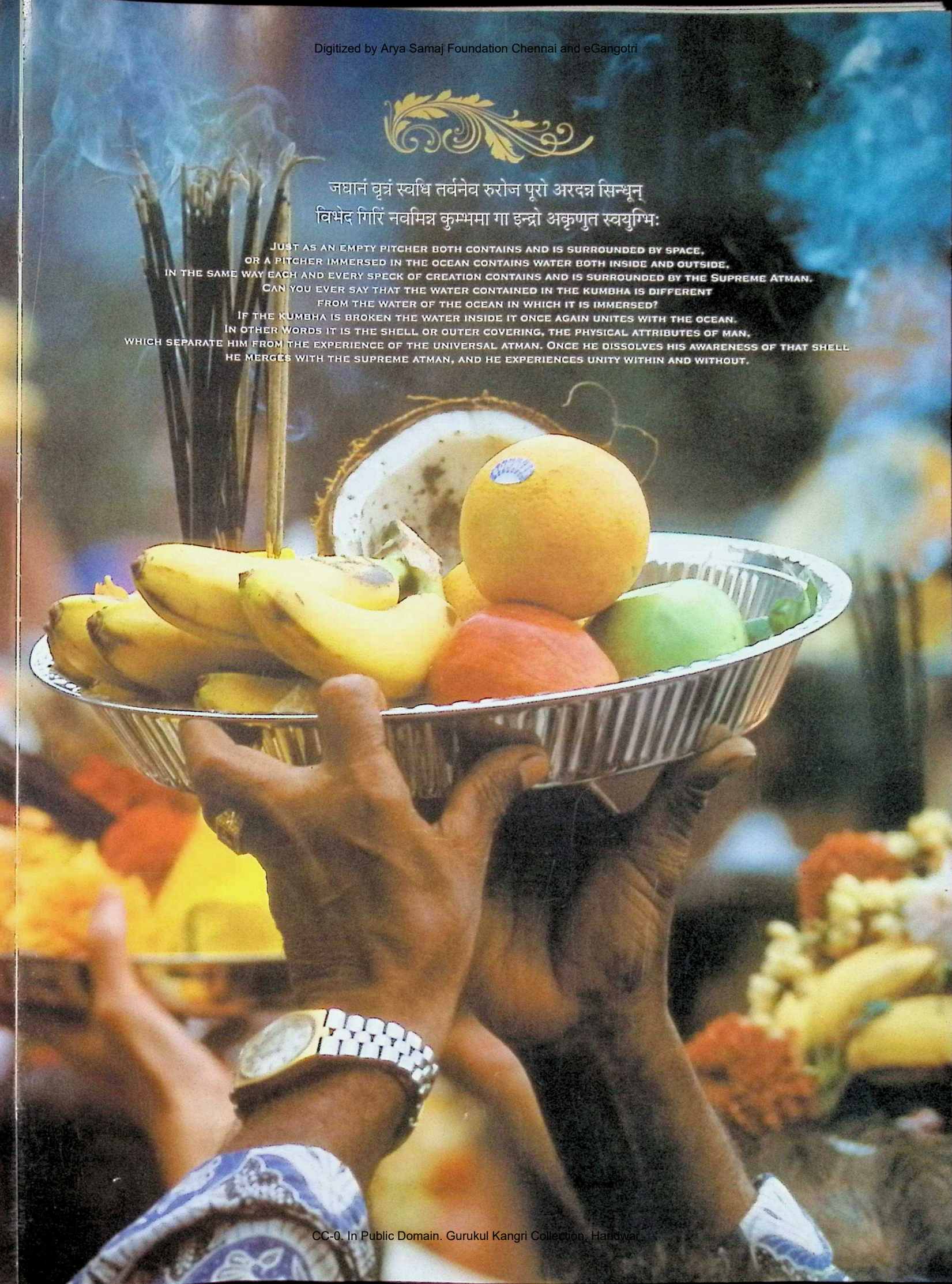

जघानं वृत्रं स्वधि तर्वनेव रुरोज पूरो अरदन्न सिन्धून्
विभेद गिरिं नवमिन्न कुम्भमा गा इन्द्रो अकृणुत स्वयुग्भिः

JUST AS AN EMPTY PITCHER BOTH CONTAINS AND IS SURROUNDED BY SPACE,
OR A PITCHER IMMERSED IN THE OCEAN CONTAINS WATER BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE,
IN THE SAME WAY EACH AND EVERY SPECK OF CREATION CONTAINS AND IS SURROUNDED BY THE SUPREME ATMAN.
CAN YOU EVER SAY THAT THE WATER CONTAINED IN THE KUMBHA IS DIFFERENT
FROM THE WATER OF THE OCEAN IN WHICH IT IS IMMERSED?
IF THE KUMBHA IS BROKEN THE WATER INSIDE IT ONCE AGAIN UNITES WITH THE OCEAN.
IN OTHER WORDS IT IS THE SHELL OR OUTER COVERING, THE PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES OF MAN,
WHICH SEPARATE HIM FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF THE UNIVERSAL ATMAN. ONCE HE DISSOLVES HIS AWARENESS OF THAT SHELL
HE MERGES WITH THE SUPREME ATMAN, AND HE EXPERIENCES UNITY WITHIN AND WITHOUT.

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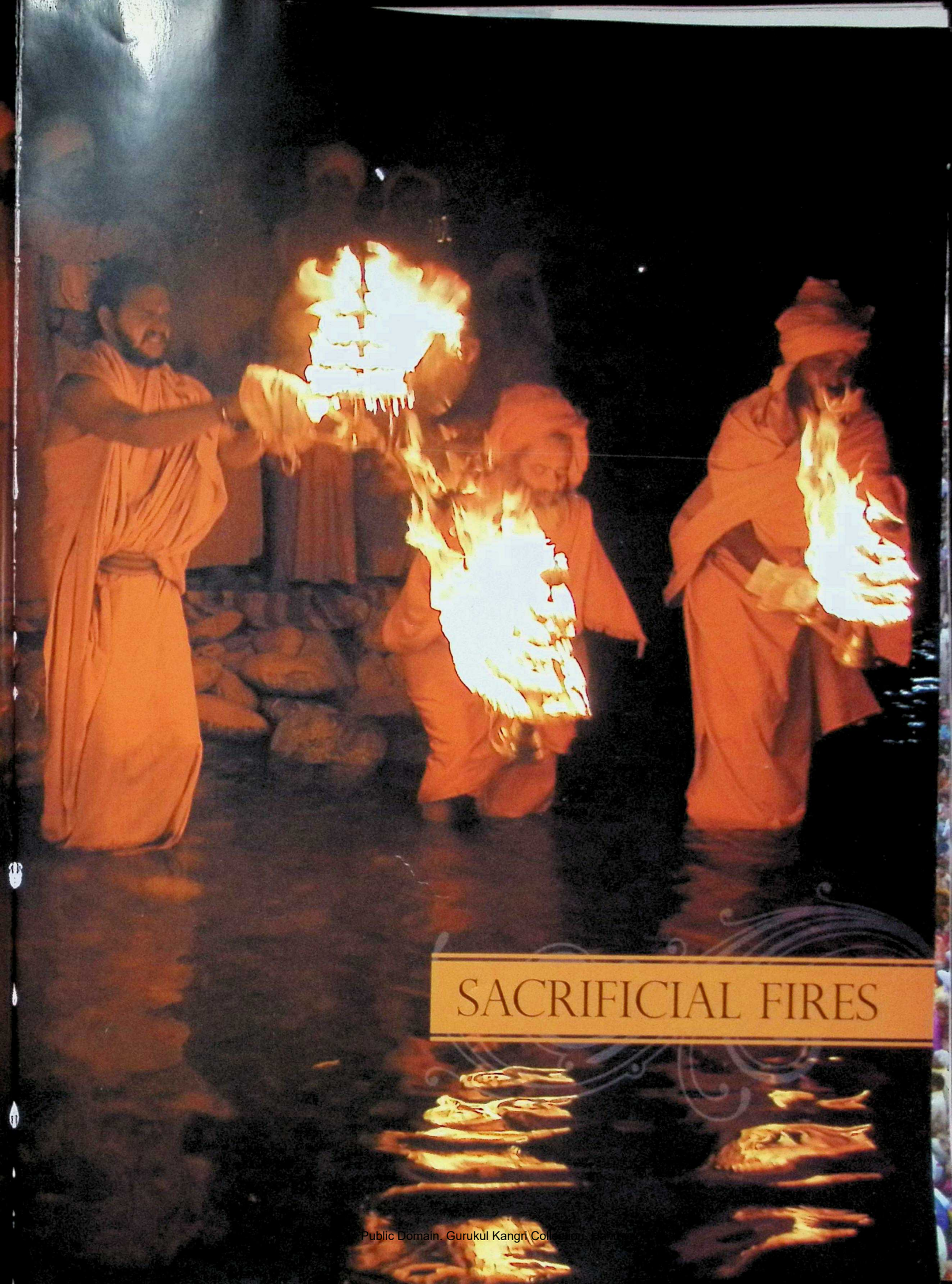

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Maha Parv of Universal Peace and Harmony

The Kumbh mela is paragon of religious congregation. No assemblage in the world history has managed to draw such enormous numbers of devotees as in Kumbh mela of Haridwar ever. Eighty million visitors across the globe is definitely a record breaking number. Kumbh mela is also acknowledged worldwide for its potential to serve as a guiding force to the humans endeavoring for inner peace and immortality.

Visitors imbibe the requisite dichotomy referring to human soul as immortal and the body comprised of five basic elements (air, water, earth, fire and sky) as mortal. Their eternal quest for immortality and peace ends at the magnanimous Kumbh mela. The basic vices overpowering chitta (mind) such as gluttony, lust, wrath, covetousness, attachment, egoism are burnt and exterminated in the holy sacrificial fire (yajna) only to help the individual gain immortality.

Not only the Kumbh mela becomes a crusade for everlasting peace and immortality, it becomes an open stage to frame rules for social behavior. Free discussions are carried out on global burning issues by saints. In ancient times, great sages and the scholarly of stature of Shankaracharya gave speeches and inspired people to tread on the path of virtue. Pious yajna were also organized at the camps in Kumbh Nagar.

Yajna and its Significance in Hinduism

Yajna is one of the most dominant of all Hindu concepts denoting sacrifice and surrender through acts of inner and outer worship. In this ritual, worship has been prevalent since Vedic times. Further oblations such as ghee, grains, spices and exotic woods are offered into fire in accordance with scriptural injunctions and through the chanting of special mantras. The element Agni (fire) is revered as the divine messenger that carries offerings and prayers to the Gods. These Yajnas or sacrificial fires are performed in large open air structures called Yajna Shalas.

At the innermost level, Upanishads suggest personal acts of worship or sacrifice as well. Life itself is a 'jivayajna' as per Hinduistic philosophy. One can make 'inner yajnas' by offering bits of the little self into the fires of sadhna and tapasya (austerities) until the higher self shines forth.

Yajna at Kumbh Mela

The five daily yajnas (panch mahayajna) recommended at Kumbh mela are as mentioned below:

Brahma Yajna- The yajna is homage to the seers and accomplished through studying and teaching the Vedas.

Deva Yajna- The yajna is homage to Gods and elementals are accomplished by offering of clarified butter and uncooked grains into the fire.

Pitri Yajna- The yajna is homage to the ancestors accomplished by offering of cakes (pinda) and water to the family line and the progenitors of mankind.

Bhuta Yajna- It is a homage to the beings including insects, birds and animals.

Manushya Yajna- This yajna is homage to fellow men accomplished by feeding the poor and includes all acts of philanthropy.

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Previous Page: Har ki Pauri during kumbh Snan
Above: Akhara sadhus performing yajna during Kumbh mela

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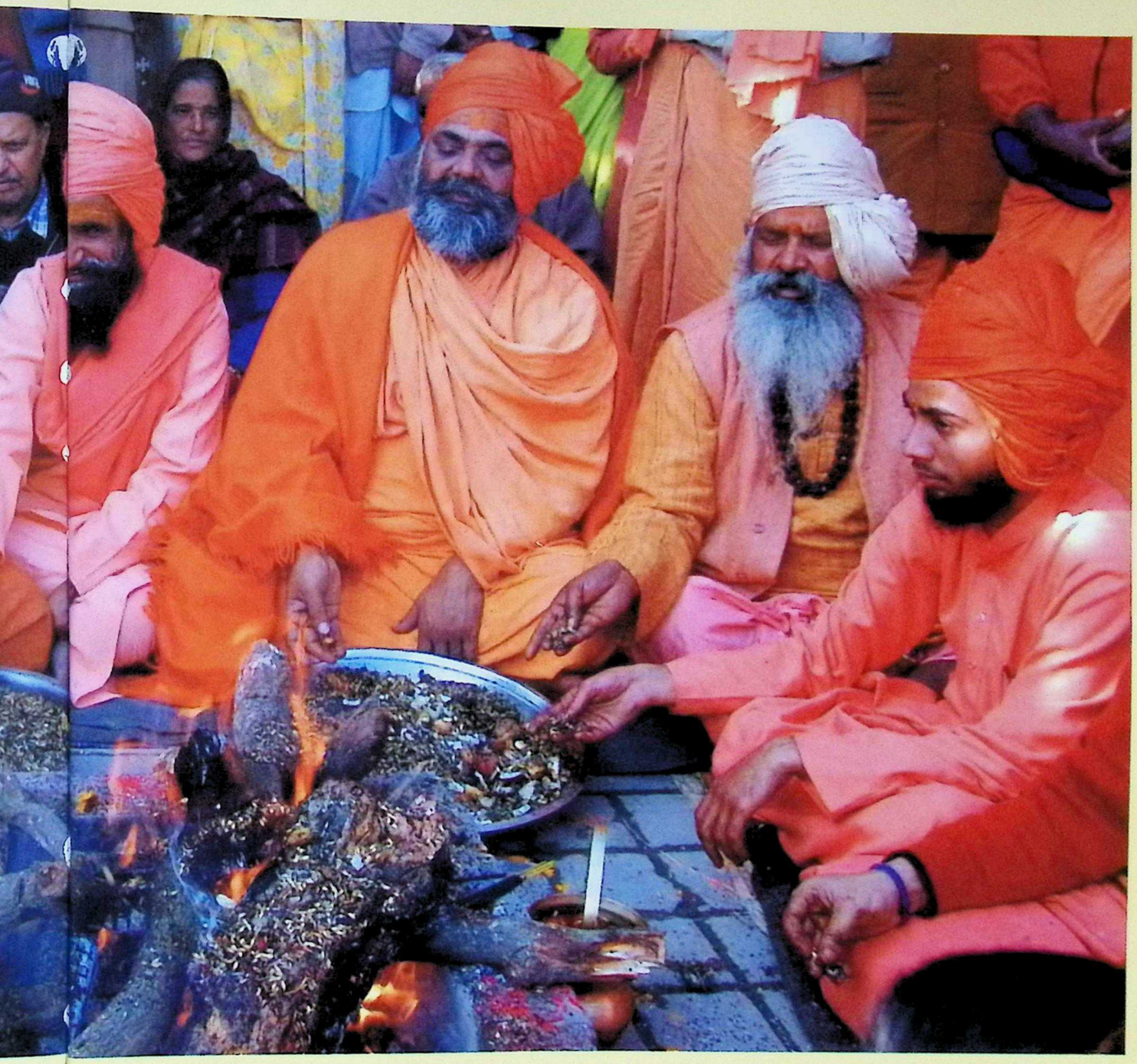

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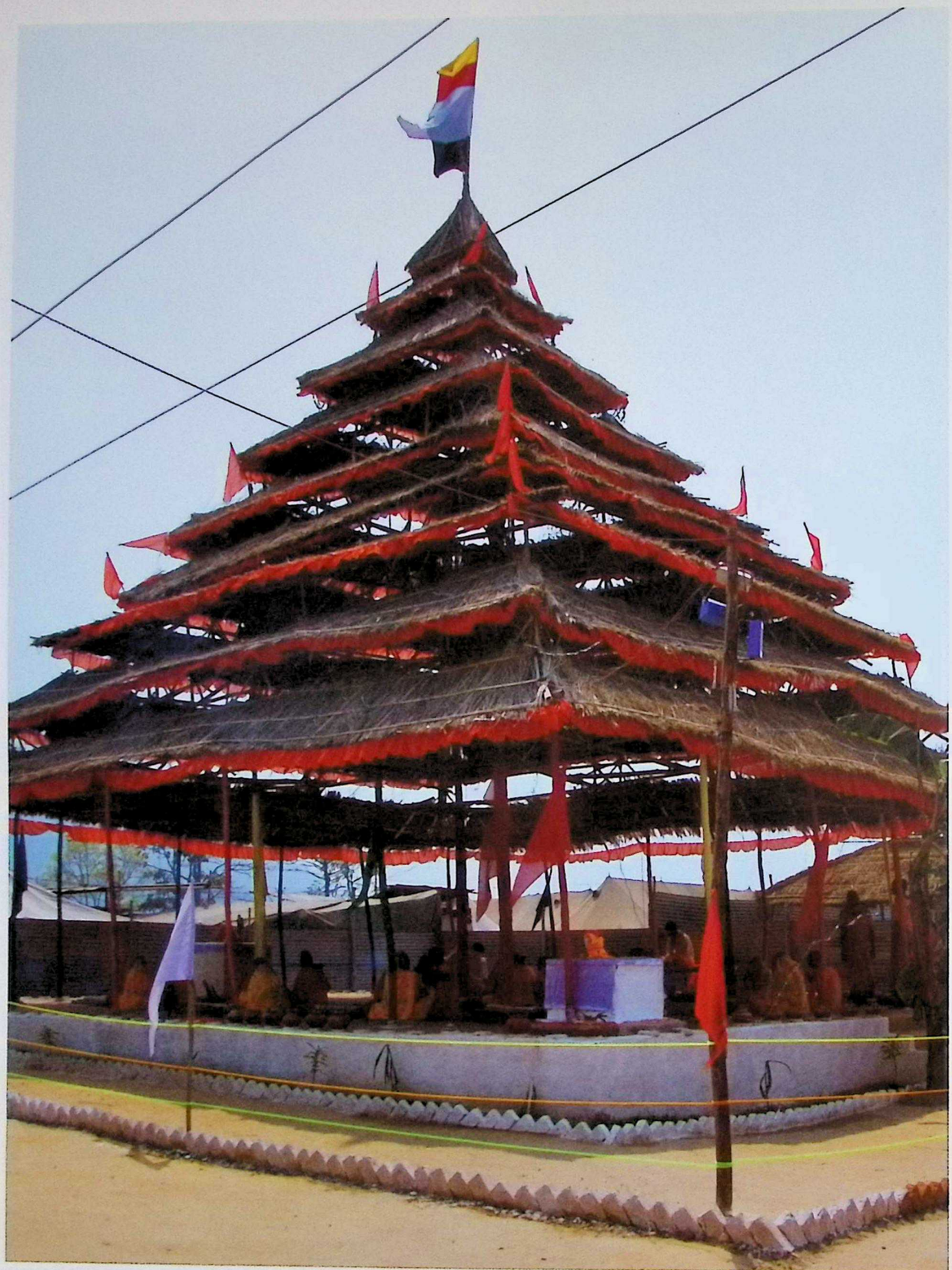

Above: Community Yajna centre like this are constructed to maintain cross ventilation to save the devoted from suffocating smoke
Right: Yajna for environmental peace

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Accomplishing all these types of 5 yajnas as per preordained times and occasions, the pilgrims at Maha Kumbh fair of Haridwar in the year 2010 won divine blessings and left the holy site with a feeling of serenity and absolute peace of mind. For four months in continuation a fest of joy, purity, sacredness and holiness continued. This feeling attained by devotees at the bank of the holy river Ganga is beyond what they catch up with at any other workshop or religious site or pilgrimage spot. The holy dip in the Ganga on specified auspicious bathing days during Kumbh mela to get the amrit (nectar) transforms their lives and they return to their respective dwellings with a thorough trans-modification of their personality.

Peace: The Highest of Values among Human Race

In his book on peace, Chidanand Muni of Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh has said, "Peace in our world, in our families and within ourselves has become the greatest need, a common catchphrase, and yet the scarcest commodity".

Without peace – both inner and outer—all else is meaningless. We can spend thousands of Dollars building beautiful homes, but if our neighbourhood is violent, our windows will be smashed. Working hard and attaining success at our jobs will hold no meaning and give no joy if we must return back to a home full of turmoil towards end of the day.

Yajna for Peace on the Banks of Ganges

Flames and fumes originating from diversely shaped, multi-storied yajnashalas (fire altars on the banks of the Ganges) were the eye catchers in the Kumbh mela. These artistically engineered yajnashalas generally stretched from 5 to 6 stories and had 1, 9, 21, 31, 51, 61, 101, 108 kundas with diverse shapes in different camp areas.

Nav kundi Yajnashala at Pilot Baba's Camp

At Pilot Baba's camp, there was a yajna kund with 'nav kundi' (nine kunds) namely; Trikon, shatkon, yonikund, chandrakund, astkonatmak, lakshmi and visham-ashtakon. These nine kunds are flanked on sides of central shriyantra. It takes nine days for a devotee to complete the pradakshina of all the nine kundas, as per the instructions of Acharya Ashokanand Shastri of Pilot Baba's camp.

The most opted for by the pilgrims was chatushkon which is for sarvarth siddhi (well-being and prosperity). Yoni kund is for security of the progeny, shatkon is for removal of six bad karmas and trikon gives various arts and skills. Vrit kund is for rain. The devotees could perform yajna ritual via offering donations as per their capacity of Rs. 11, 100, 1100, 2100 and so on.

61 - Kundi Yajnashala at Shankaracharya's camp

In Shankaracharya's camp, there were 61 kundas in yajnashala. The poles of yajnashala were painted in different colors representing different deities and navgrahas of Hindu mythology. Swami Adhyokshjanand told me that performing yajna with rhythmic Vedic mantra recitations had a special significance during the Kumbh mela.

Almost every camp had a yajnashala. Conventional to innovative designs were used to construct these yajanashalas giving the whole Kumbh Nagar a distinct appearance. Flames and fumes could be seen emerging from these yajnashalas which acted as the purifiers to atmosphere around.

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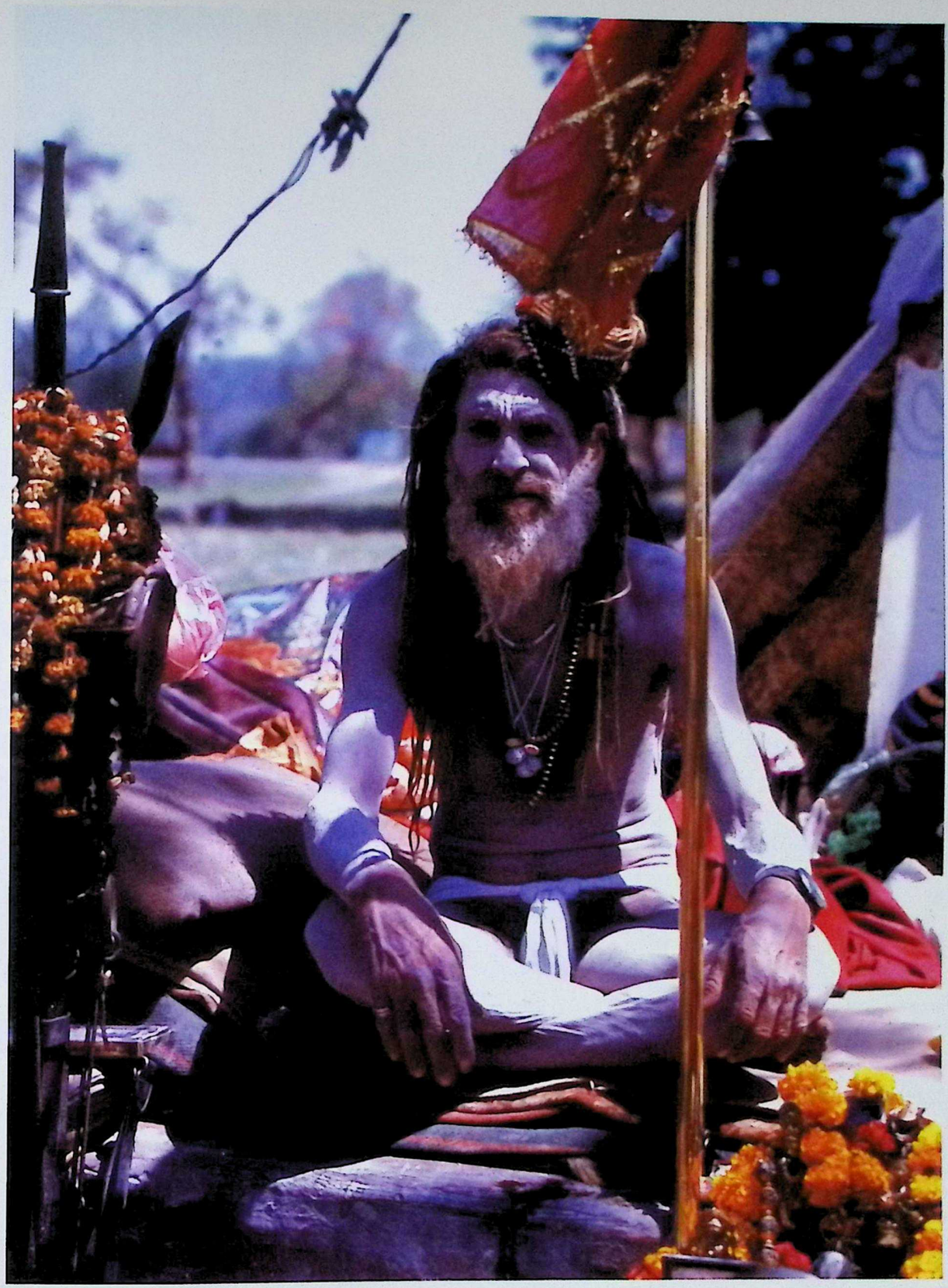

Saints of unknown origin also participate in all the kumbh melas without asking any help from the government and do attract public attention

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Above: Swami Adhyokshjananda, Shankaracharya of Puri math performs Yajna at his Kumbh mela camp
Right: Havan Kundas (fire altars) of design & shapes

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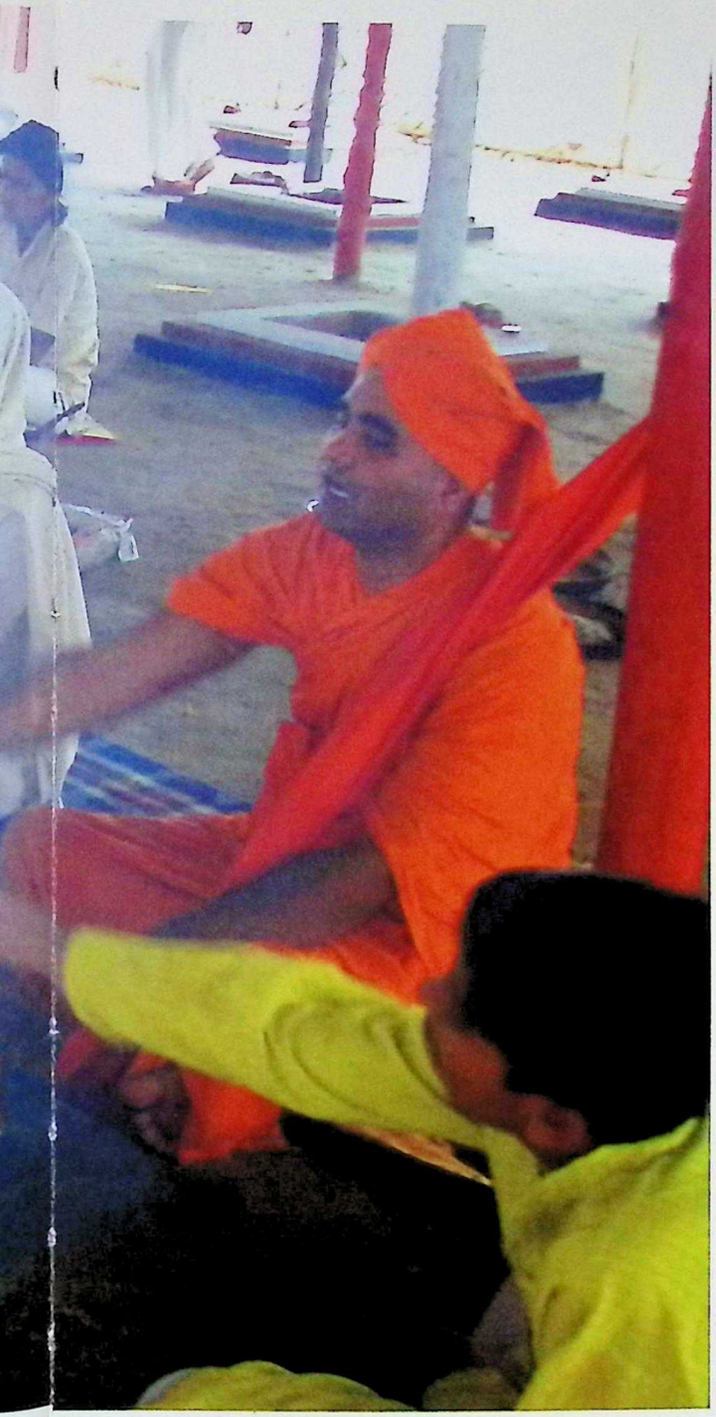

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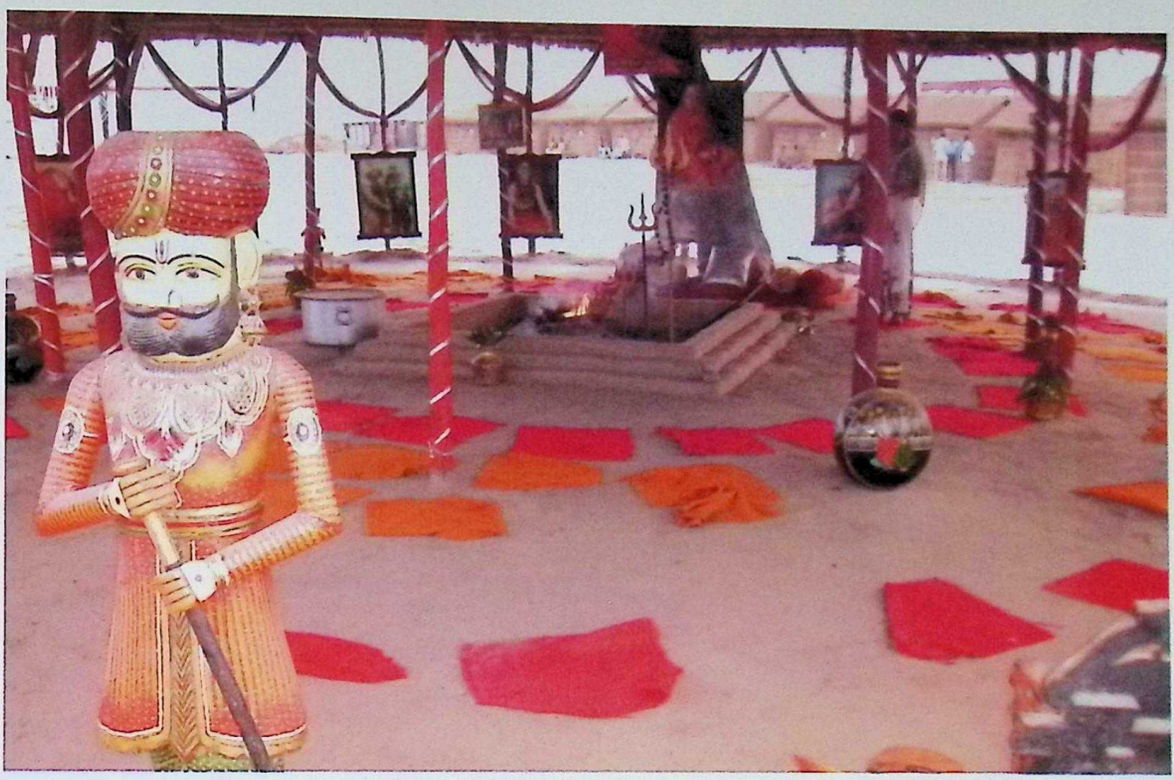

Artistically decorated Yajanshalas at Soham baba's camp
Next Page: Swami Ramdev and Acharya Balkrishna performs 'Yajna' on Ramnavmi festival of Kumbh festival

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Yajurved Yajna on 'Ram Navami' of Mahakumbh Mela

Yajna is a key concept of Veda. It is a pious union between the cosmic power referred to as God and humans. Each mantra inscribe in the Vedas is categorized into three types:
Rik, Yajus, Sama.

A rik mantra is metrical, i.e., it obeys one of a hundred well-defined metres. Rik literally means verse of illumination A mantra which is sung in an elaborate manner according to specific rules is a sama mantra. A yajus mantra is a rhythmic prose wherein the passage continued is not in any fixed metre. A yajan reciting Yajurveda Mantra will perform yajurved yajna wherein oth rik and yajus are chanted.

They say entering into anyasa s similar to getting reincarnated wherein you forgo all your belongings, relations and bindings, idiosyncracies and start life afresh on the path of spirituality, pledging to serve mankind.

Sacrifice for the Nation

On his 16th sanyasa day (day of initiation) on Ram Navami, which is also a major Hindu festival, Mahamandaleshwars, Shankaracharyas and other saints blessed the Yoga Guru, Swami Ramdev, at Patanjali Yog Peeth of Haridwar. A three- day Yajurved yajna was concluded by young girls who had taken vows to maintain celibacy for the rest of their life in service of India. These young maidens are a part of sewavrati brahmcharya naishtik parampara.

Sacrificial fire was lit and offerings of 'om rashtraya namah' were done in the havan kund amidst Vedic mantras. Swami Ramdev inspired the citizens of India to rise above individual interests and keep the nation's interest as supreme.

Uniqueness of Maha Kumbh Palanquin or Doli

Since the beginning of Mahakumbh mela, each bathing (snan) date had some uniqueness attached to it. The last shahi snan of April 14 which coincided with day of Baisakhi festival also marked the beginning of 'Purushottam Mas' or 'Adhik Mas' (extra month as per the Hindu lunar calendar) the next day. The most opportune moment for April 14, as per the star connections, occurred after 5000 years, said the astrologers.

It was also said that the merit earned by bathing on the last shahi snan of April 14 fetched the pilgrim a merit of 1 lakh parikramas (rounds of earth). It is believed that a single dip on April 14 is powerful and unique enough to bestow a devotee the merit equivalent to one thousand snans of Kartik month, one hundred snans of Magh month, crores of snans of Vaishakh month.

Doli of Deities from the Himalayas Take Holy Dip for Creating Collective Energy

The whole of vaishakh (April) month was considered auspicious this year on account of Kumbh mela and an extra month which is known for undertaking religious activities. No deity of hill state or from down south was left out from taking a dip on this auspicious date as claimed by the religious gurus. The deities were brought in decorated palanquins for the holy dip in the Ganges. This act brought together many different groups of devotees of diverse Hindu religious faiths from north to south stretching from eastern to western states. In this way every single pilgrim at Kumbh mela linked himself to millions of others to the place which he originally belonged to. The merit of performing yajna and taking holy dip was linked to thousands living far away from Haridwar. Hence, the grand Kumbh mela acted as a binding fair of different religious sects and communities.

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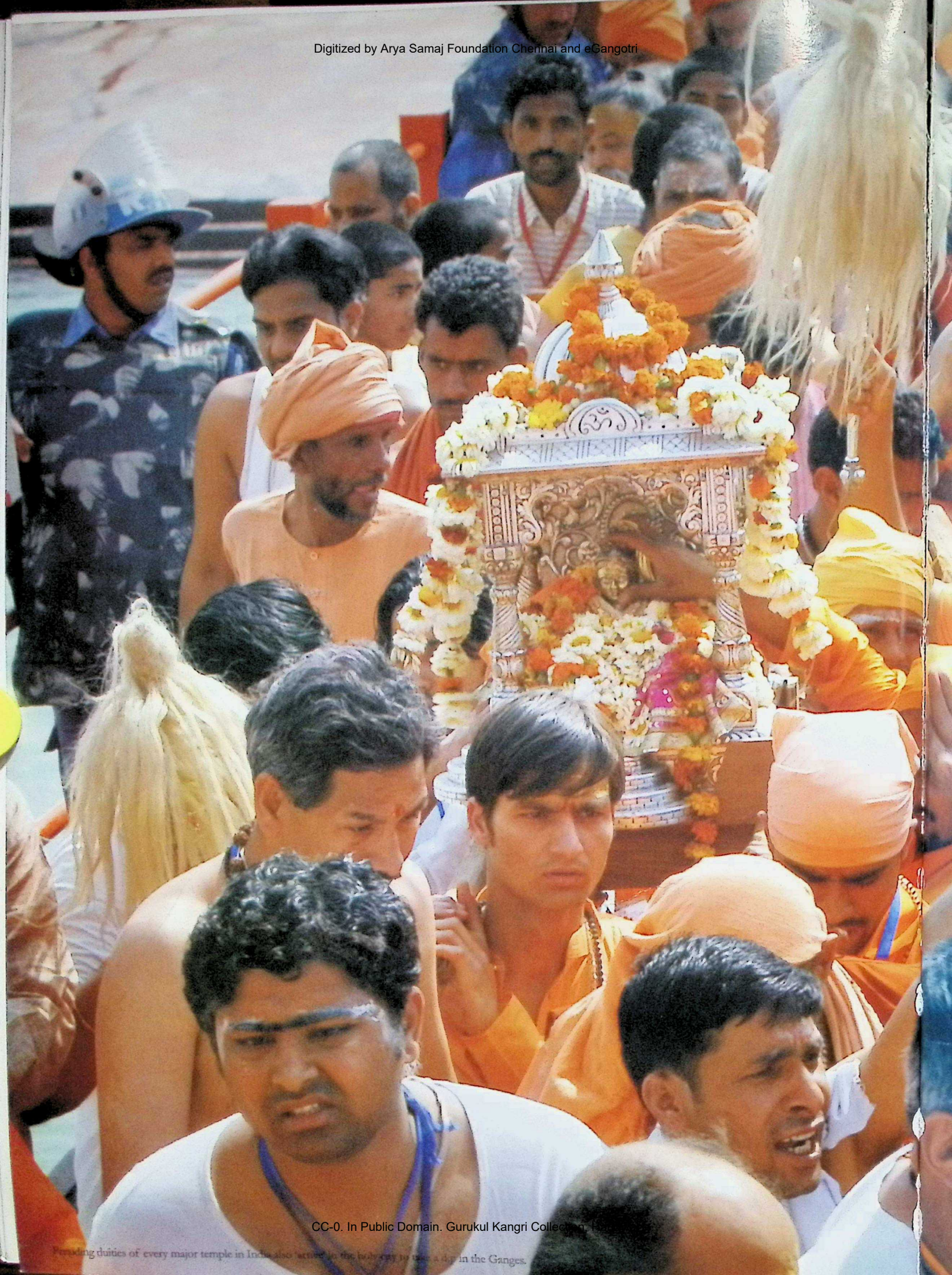

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Presiding duities of every major temple in India also 'arrives' in the holy city to take a dip in the Ganges.

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Akhara procession with their presiding deity proceeding towards Ganges

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Above: Southern India Deity Balaji's idol was brought to haridwar during Kumbh Mela for the holy dip

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Dolis (palanquins) of hill deities of Uttarakhand state were brought for holy dip in Ganges Water is considered sacred even by Devi Devtas (lords) in Hinduism.

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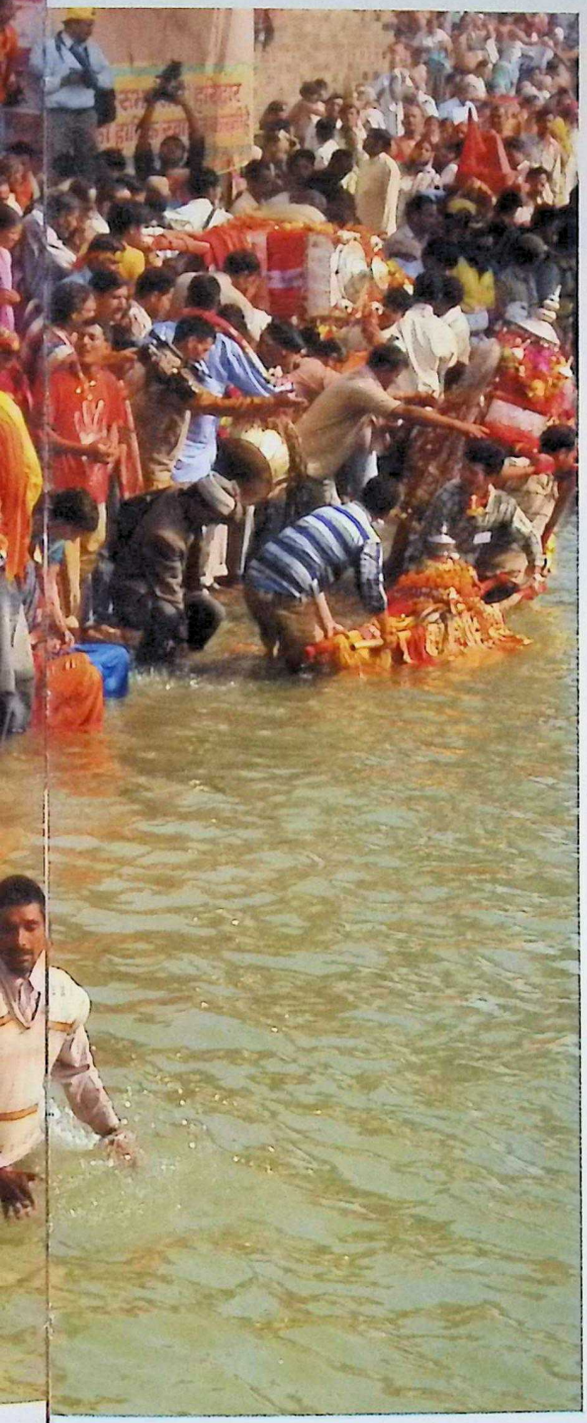

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Kumbh Mela: Some Views

Swami Satyamitrananda, former Shankaracharya, Jyotirmath and founder Bharat Mata Mandir had said:

"Head of human body is like a kumbh (a pitcher). Inside this Kumbh, lies the intellect. Only in 'Sahasrar Chakra' resides Kundalini energy. A yogi, practicing sadhna (devotional practices and austerities) and traversing through all the six chakras (energy centres) of body located along the spine, awakens the kundalini shakti (primordial energy) which is in sleep state at muladhar chakra. It is believed that after the awakening of the kundalini energy, man becomes a supreme yogi and is endowed with many super natural powers. He earns the right to attain the ultimate state of Samadhi (concentrated meditation)."

The ideology behind the tradition of Kumbh mela must have been to awaken human mind and its intellect to attain ultimate tranquility and peace. In due course of time, it became popular as supreme spiritual thought and thus Kumbh was transformed into a grand fair.

Through the Kumbh mela of 2010, millions of pilgrims were once again recharged of truth of life through its diverse programs. Kumbh mela acted as a huge platform for dissemination of meaningful and relevant messages of the contemporary times. Each saint contributed in his own way sharing their expertise and experiences. Yoga exponent guru Swami Ramdev promised to make the country healthy and self reliant. Founder of Bharat Mata Mandir, Swami Satyamitrananda contributed to the fair by awakening the feeling of patriotism for the country. Other saints like Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Dr Pranav Pandya, the Dharamacharyas and Mahamandaleshwars reestablished through their discourses, the fact justifying spirituality as the backbone of India.

From the organizational viewpoint, the government of Uttarakhand did its utmost in ensuring smooth running of the mela. Ample arrangements were done to maintain cleanliness and security by the administrative officials.

National integration is the most important part of Kumbh mela. The participants witness inimitable unity of India and devotion existing across the nation amidst the diversity of caste, creed, linguistic, and costume variations. Where Ganga flows in the form of 'Neerakar' (water form), and the 'Nirakar' (formless) Om gives energy, this unique amalgamation of Nirakar and Neerakar of God is the Kumbh mela. Veda, Upanishad, Yajna, Havan, worship, free community kitchen and dissemination of scriptural knowledge through 'kathas' (oral recitations) are different flowers of garden of Kumbh mela. Visitors to this garden will definitely be happy man. Kumbh mela is a unique blend of social equanimity, nationalism, spiritual equanimity, blending of old and new culture. Without any formal invitation, forbearing dust and scorching heat at a massive religious congregation is not seen anywhere else but in India.

This devotion must live long but at the same time, blind devotion must come to an end. The rajsi vaibhav (royalty) of monks makes them a target of criticism. Youth must be awakened so that fraud does not get its roots. Gayatri, Gaey(holy cow), the Ganges, Geeta (scripture), Vedanta, Ramayana should be preserved; then alone would the Kumbh mela get its true meaning.

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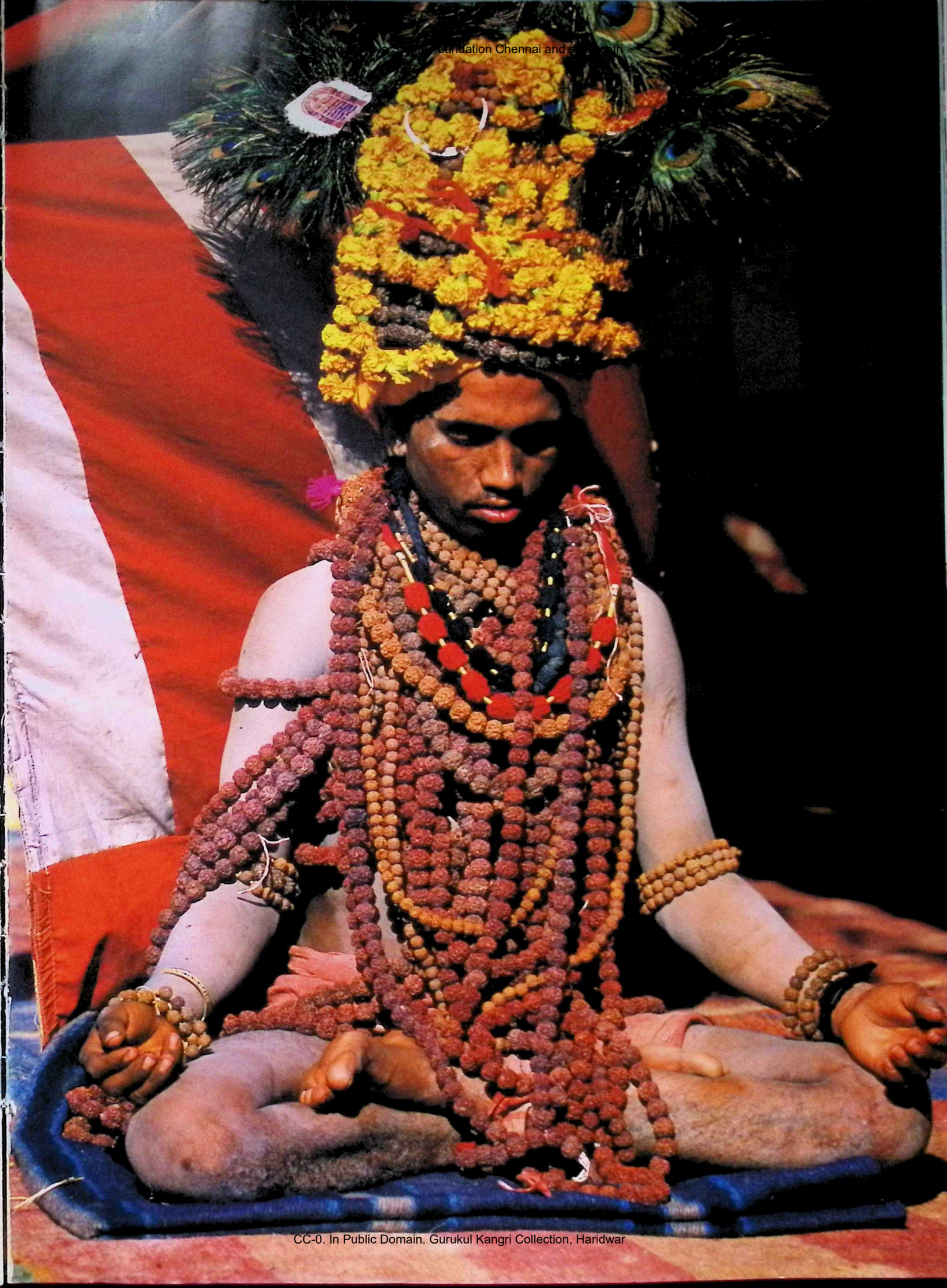

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This Kumbh mela of Haridwar is very special because the city is situated at the foothills of Shivalik ranges of Himalayas. It gives a mental and spiritual solace to the tiring visitors who come from plains of the country. The grand Himalayas beacon visitors to be steadfast in one's resolution and achieve the heights observing supreme sensibility. Haridwar is also a storehouse of herbal medicines. Other recommended spots for Kumbh mela; Prayag, Ujjain, Nasik lack this luster. Haridwar alone cherishes it. So Hail Mother Ganga! Hail Indian culture! Hail Vedic religion and Hail the holy city, Haridwar!

Sri Mahant Gyan Dass (National head of Akhara Council)

Sri Manant said that the organizing fests like Kumbh mela is very essential, as these are organized for 'Manavta ki raksha' (defense of humanity) and 'Saampradayikta ka vinash' (destruction of communal forces). There is no place of caste or creed at fairs and festivals of this genre. He also added that Kumbh mela is an evidence in itself that without any calls or invitations, 1 crore 70 lakh people are drawn for just one day to enjoy holy dip at 'Har Ki Pauri.'

On just a mere announcement that on a particular date, under the effect of a particular combination of stars and planets in the cosmos, the auspicious occasion will occur; millions throng for the holy dip in the Ganges River. It definitely proves that people have great faith and devotion towards religious fests, which impulses them to gather on their own and each one is striving for peace in their lives.

Kumbh mela is a fair of our ancient saints and sages. The hallmark of this fest is shahi snan (royal dip). This mahakumbh fair of 2010 was unique in many respects. Four royal baths were observed instead of the tradition of following two. Significance of Kumbh mela snan is not stipulated to one saint or a specific sect (akhara). It is the holy dip of the worshipping deities of all the 13 akharas that paves way for the royal march or peshwais. Except a small mishap, the whole of kumbh fair passed off peacefully and the administrative officials deputed in the holy city Haridwar worked as sewaks (service men) in the service of mankind.

Another significant happening of the Kumbh mela 2010 is that the long tradition of 500 years was broken and the akharas reunited for royal bath. Earlier kumbh melas had seen many fierce battles and fights among various akharas. Sects of Udasin, Vaishvav, Nirmal and Bairagis were separated and Vaishnavas had started celebrating their own kumbh mela in Vrindavan. It was the first time that all akharas came together for the celebrations. A memorable historical episode was written in the history of the royal fair 2010.

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Previous Page: A mystic sadhu with impressive display of long strings of holy rudraksha beads meditating near the banks of Ganges
Above Left: Swami Satyamitrananda, former Shankaracharya Jyotirmata and founder of Bharat Mata Mandir
Above Right: Sri Mahant Gyan Das. National head of Akhara Council of India

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Swami Nityashudhananda, Secretary Ram Krishna Mission

"No invitations, no callings, yet so many people gather at one particular point, come on their own for religious worship," said Swami.

In this world's largest congregation, common folks irrespective of their sect or religious group come for spiritual gain or upliftment of their soul. The Ganges is one of the most sacred rivers of India and has been given the status of a mother.

Exploration of integrity and its potential is not a cake walk. It is believed that potential of integrity, if utilized by the government in right order for apt cause, can work wonders for the nation. This will also help India beat superpowers of the world. Dynamism held within integrity is the major force of unification. When so many people assemble together during Kumbh mela for same purpose, it benefits both the people and society.

People visiting this magnanimous fair spend money liberally. Out of the four venues of Kumbh mela, the Kumbh mela of Haridwar is the longest one since it stretches for over three months. Furthermore, thousands of people are employed for different tasks and it becomes a bread winner for millions. This economic aspect, if considered practically, leads to the development of the place wherein millions of rupees are rolled in. Tremendous infrastructural development takes place with the construction of new roads, bridges and water tanks. Undoubtedly, giving direct religious benefit to the pilgrims, Kumbh mela also indirectly benefits the society and the country as a whole.

As elucidated by Swami Vivekananda, a great Indian saint of the Nineteenth century, religion is the lifeline of India. This fact amazes people of foreign lands. During Kumbh mela, a Victorian family from United Kingdom had visited one ashram in Kankhal. A young daughter of the family was awestruck when I told her that the huge gathering is in the name of religion.

"It is unique thing in the history of civilization" was the only expression of this young lady.

From a humanistic point of view, Kumbh mela exhilarates the feelings of people giving them an experience of 'being in Vaikunth' (heaven) as claimed by one of the devotees after having stayed for seven days in ashram during the fair. Life is full of turmoil of varied degrees and these fairs are of utmost importance to gain mental peace and relief.

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A group of ladies performing special ritual puja called Holika puja

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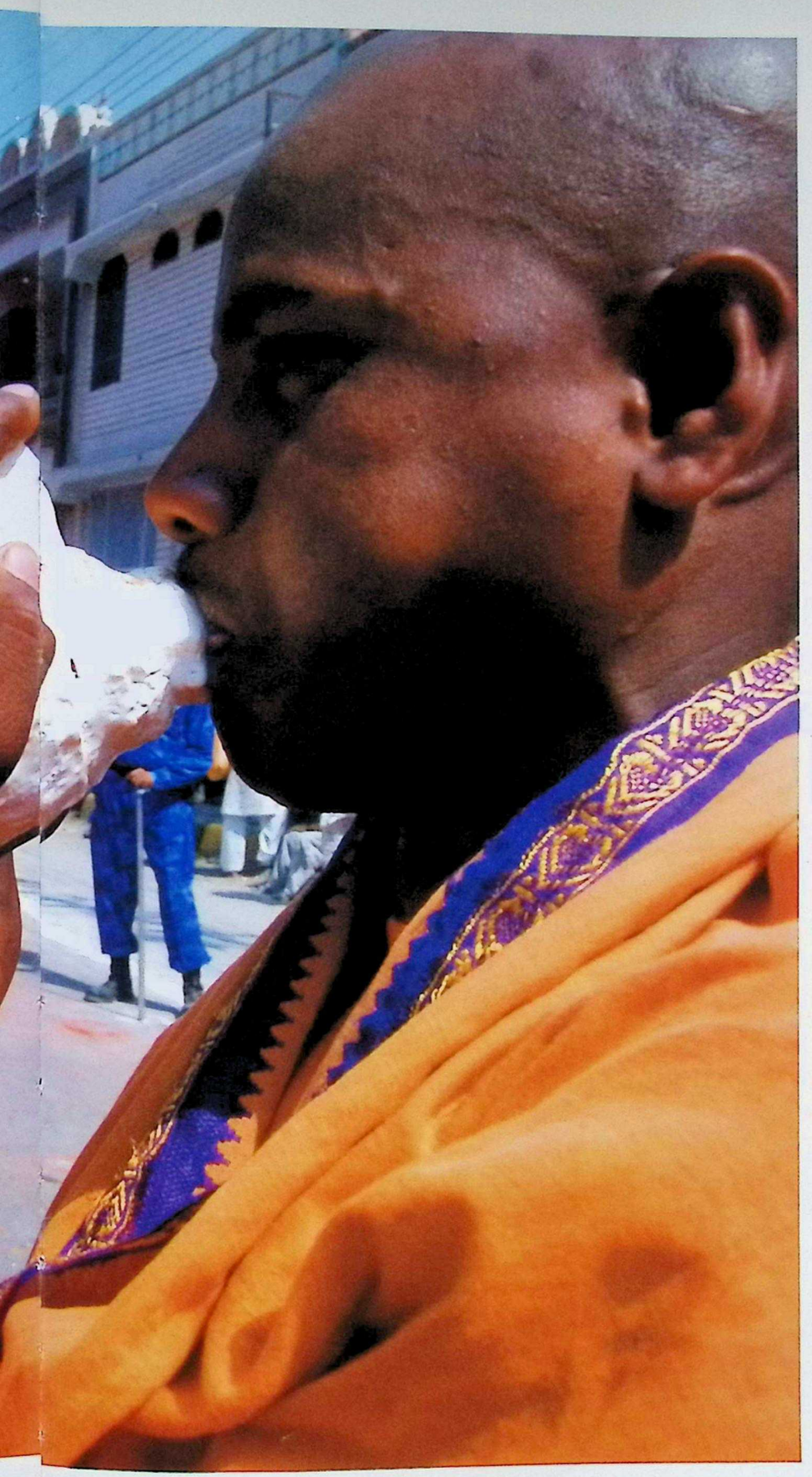

Swami Nityashuddhananda Secretary Ram Krishan Mission at Kankhal

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Mahamandaleshwar Swami Santoshi Mataji

In Mata's own words:

"Kumbh mela is the biggest religious fair of the world. People across the world gather at one single point during this fair. India is primarily a religious country. Inspite of so many diverse cultures, languages and customs, it looks same at some level, during the Kumbh mela." The Kumbh mela of 2010 was a perfect panorama where the Indians were integrated into single thread of unification. After every twelve years, this cycle of carnival of spirituality is repeated.

Taking its Pauranic (scriptural) significance, Kumbh is the time when 'amrit kalash' gets filled up but I feel that Kumbh facilitates the congregation of the devotees and the spiritual gurus, who come together to discuss the social, worldly and metaphysical subjects. Kumbh Manthan (churning of the ocean) is actually the Vichar Manthan (churning of ideas) to get the nectar or essence of religion. The philosophy of Adi guru Shankaracharya is a wonderful philosophy which is very apt in contemporary times as well. This tradition which is continuing till date according to which the Dharamacharyas (religious mentors), followers and crores of pilgrims assemble together at the banks of the Ganges to take a holy dip and listen to the teachings of the stalwarts of religion from their 'mukharvrind' which flow in the form of goddess Saraswati. They feel elated and gratified after having bathed physically in the Ganges and mentally in Saraswati.

To continue the tradition of Kumbh mela maintaining its true ethos, it is mandatory that it is saved from getting tainted by commercialization of religion. The truth sought by our ancient sages after practicing lot of penances should not be wasted away. Like the spendthrift heirs of a rich man, we have no right to waste the earning of our rishi-munis; rather must contribute to the treasure of knowledge by contributing our own share as well. It is said that hollowness is coming in pilgrims and sadhus and most of the activities revolve around earning name, fame and money. The devotional spirit should not be lost. Let the true meaning of our fairs and festivals be not drained away.

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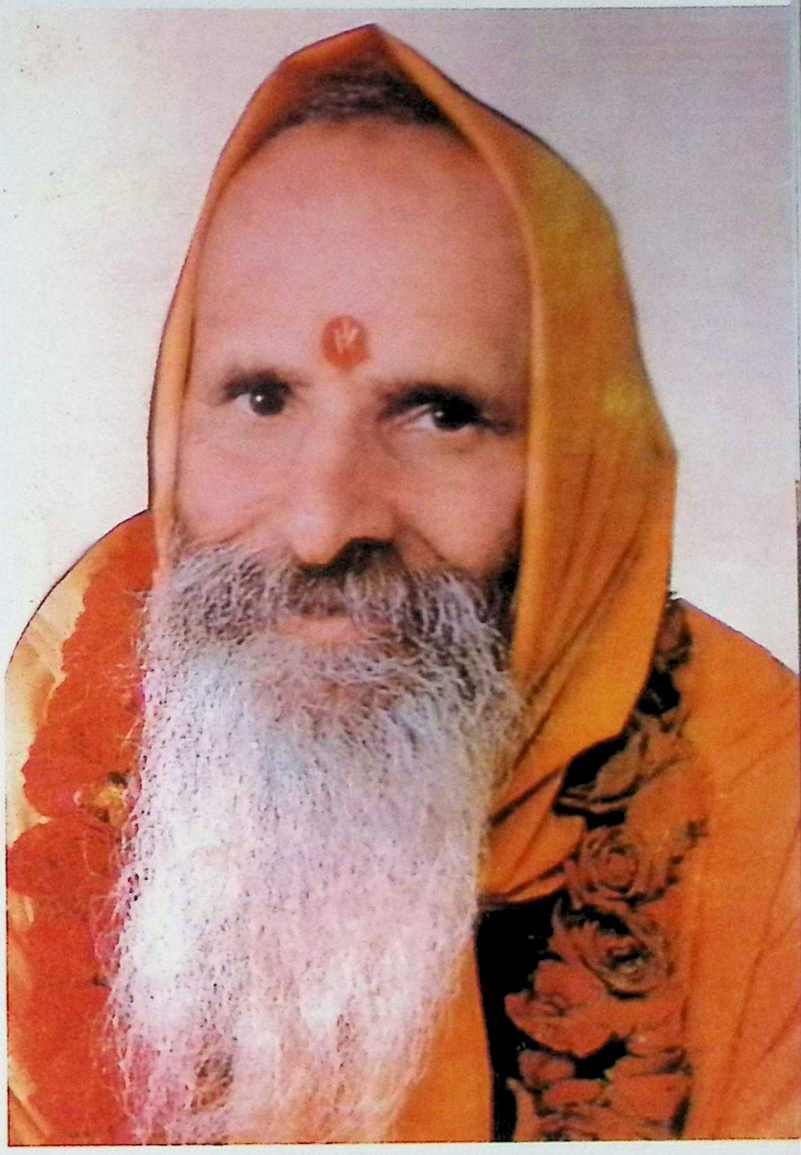

Above Left: Mahamandaleshwar Swami Santoshi Mata
Above Right: Yugpurush Mahamandaleshwar Swami Paramananda

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Yug Purush Swami Paramananda

"This magnanimous event of the holy city, Haridwar, is an opportunity to indulge in meaningful religious discussions and devotional exchange of ideas, through religious assemblies where many doctrines are debated and standardized. Not anywhere on earth do so many people congregate for a common cause than Kumbh mela in India. The true universality of Hindu festivals like Kumbh mela can indeed be visualized in its supremacy, when people from all over the world come to witness this greatest religious congregation."

'Hinsaya duyate chittam sa hinduritismritah', this means a person who experiences a sense of grief, disgust, while injuring, hurting or killing someone is truly a Hindu. This humanistic Hindu philosophy beckons all Hindu and non-Hindus alike to visit and revel in a feeling of the largest deluge of faith during Mahakumbh mela.

Vedic rishis command us to do 'krinvanto vishwamaryam' (Make the World Noble). We have the mandate from our scriptures to spread our superior culture and philosophy in the entire universe and welcome others who come to us seeking the truth. Religion should not be bound by precincts. The concept of Vasudhev Kutumbakam (one world one family) which denotes liberalism in our thinking has helped to project the magnanimity and spiritual height of our philosophy and Kumbh mela is the projection of one such philosophy.

Great Indian poet, writer and guru, Vedvyasa tells us in Mahabharata that we absorbed entire tribes and communities of other beliefs into our fold 'kirat hunandra pulidam pulkasha, abhir kankayvanah khashadaya, yenye ch papayadupashraya shrayat shudhyanti tasmayi prabhvishnave namah'. This shloka dates back to more than 5000 years. We ought to inspire and openly accept amongst us, anyone who wishes to be one of us. We should invite the indigenous people of various nations to allow them revel in our celebrations and religious functions. We should also introduce them to our philosophy and evoke a sense of respect and dignity for our religion and way of life.

For any common man attending the Kumbh mela is once in a lifetime opportunity. According to the Hindu mythology this mela is supposed to be the 'King of Teerthas,' as all holy men, rishi, munis, religious scholars and astute devotees gather here to attain salvation by taking holy bath in Ganga. It is said that bathing during Kumbh absolves the bather of all sins and evils. As said by a great Indian saint Ramakrishna Paramhansa, "Ganga vari sakshat brahmvari" which means that the waters of Ganga are truly Brahamic.

People look up to Kumbh mela with highest regard, as it is believed to give liberation to the bather from all miseries and sufferings of life. It also paves way for attainment of Moksha. However, it is of paramount importance that the individual performing rituals confers absolute faith and trust in the power of divinity. It is already mentioned about the Kumbh mela in the Brahma Purana and Vishnu Purana, which clearly state that a person who performs the bathing ceremony during the auspicious period derives manifold benefits, which surpasses the reward obtained by performing numerous Ashvamedha rituals. References can be found about the significance of this ritual in Varaha Purana and Matsya Purana as well."

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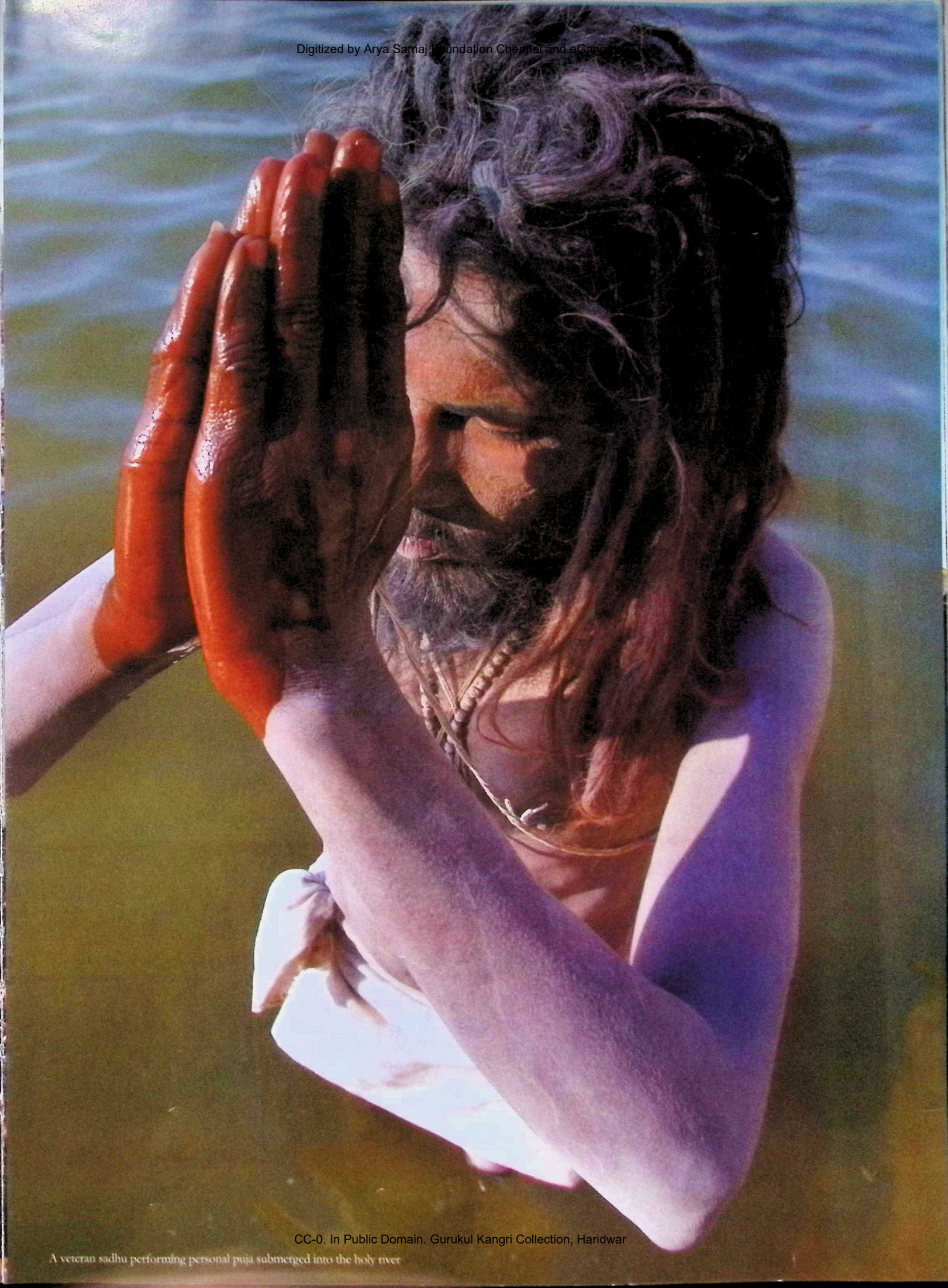

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A veteran sadhu performing personal puja submerged into the holy river

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कुं पृथ्वीम्, उभयति पूरयति मंगल सम्मानादिदंभिरिति कुम्भः

KUMBHA MEANS THAT WHICH BESTOWS AUSPICIOUSNESS ON EARTH AND MUCH CONTENTMENT.

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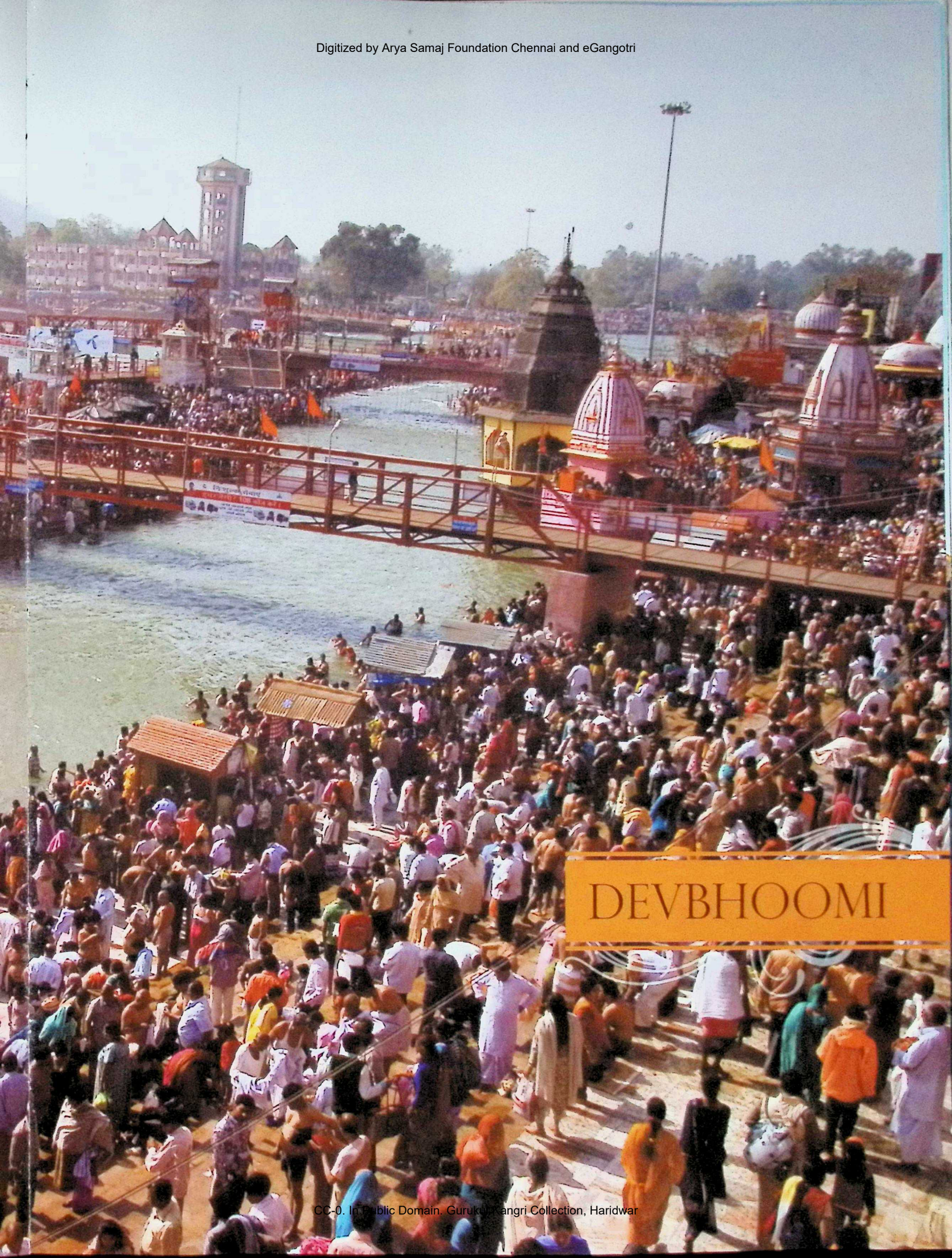

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King of mountains- The Himalayas

Pilgrim's Paradise

The Himalayas or 'Giri Raj' (King of Mountains) is source of life to many perennial rivers. Pilgrims visit the holy shrines Badrinath, Kedarnath and Amarnath. They also visit Yamunotri and Gangotri, the origin of holy rivers of Yamuna and Ganga. These are also referred to as 'char dhams' (four pilgrimage sites) of Devbhoomi (Uttarakhand state). The Himalayas is also a pilgrimage spot for Sikhs known as Hemkund Sahib in Chamoli district. The altitude of the Himalayas signifies loftiness of human soul. Their vastness symbolizes universality of mankind's consciousness just as Mount Olympus of Greek mythology and Mount Fuji in Japan. Being a heaven of spiritual practices, the Kumayun range in the Himalayas is known as 'tapobhumi' or place of spiritual practices. Legend says that Lord Shiva roamed with his bull in the areas around Kailash and Manasarovar.

Favorite of Saints and Gurus

From time immemorial, the Himalayas have invited seekers, peace lovers, philosophers, artists, yogis, anchorites and sages to their bosom. Prophets and sages have found peace of isolation and magnificence of solitude in the Himalayas. Shankaracharya (788-820) established a hermitage in this holy mountain range. Swami Vivekananda founded the Mayavati Ashram, at a distance of 50 kilometers from Almora. The Himalayan mountain ranges were the meditation ground of many ancient and famous Hindu sages like sage Manu, sage Vashist and many more. Every year, thousands of devotees visit this sacred land to wash out their sins and attain salvation. Garhwal Himalayas, a subrange of the Himalayas is denoted as 'the land of Gods'. It is home to some of the most revered religious destinations of India. Haridwar, the site of Kumbh Mela is one of these sacred places, the most sought after spot for peace lovers. They are regular visitors to this easily approachable and well connected city, especially during grand fairs and festivals for the holy dip.

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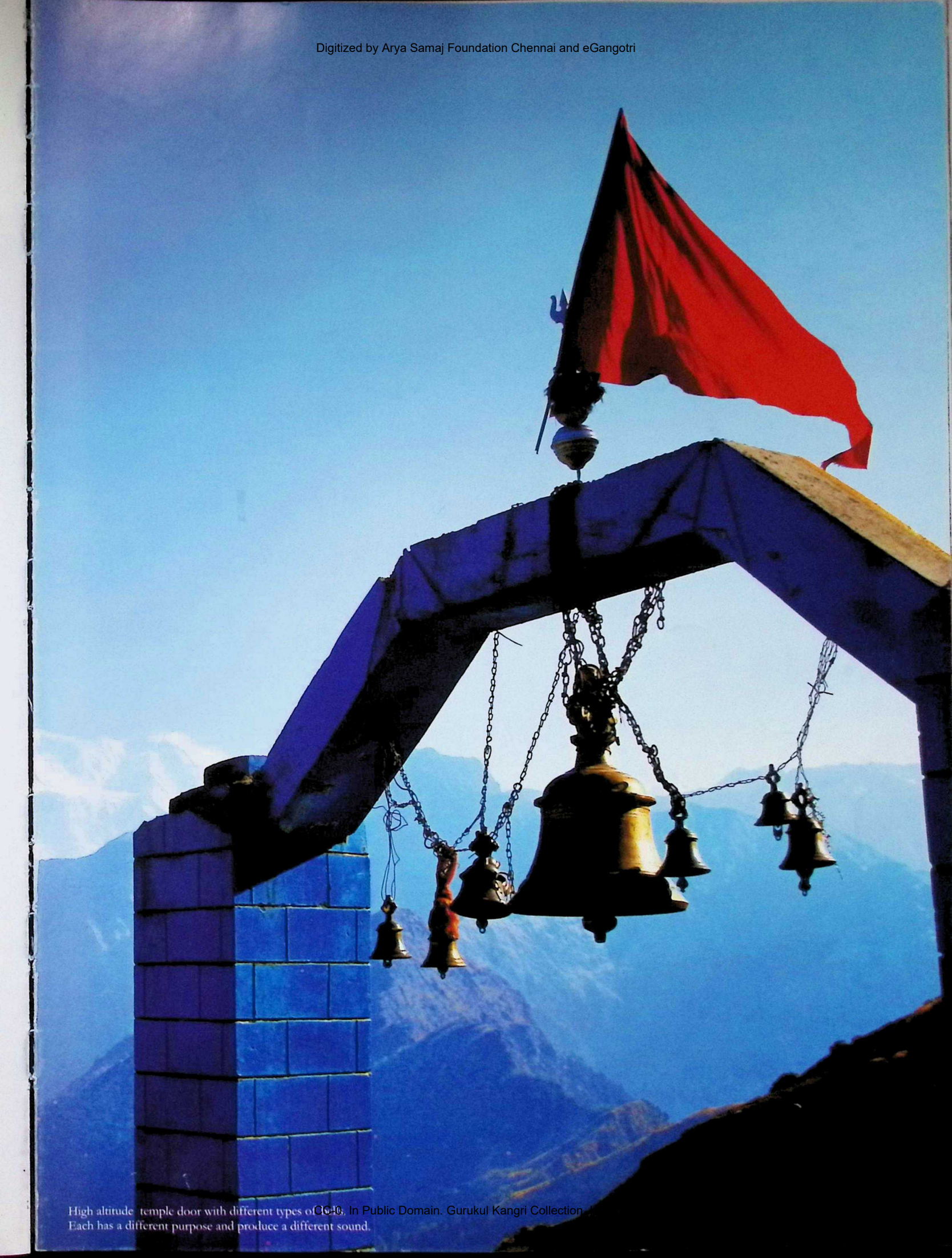

High altitude temple door with different types of bells.
Each has a different purpose and produce a different sound.

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Above: The Himalayas have several of Such make shift temples owned and maintained by a small local group
Right: Kedarnath Temple
Extreme Right: Pedestrian pilgrims with their belongings.

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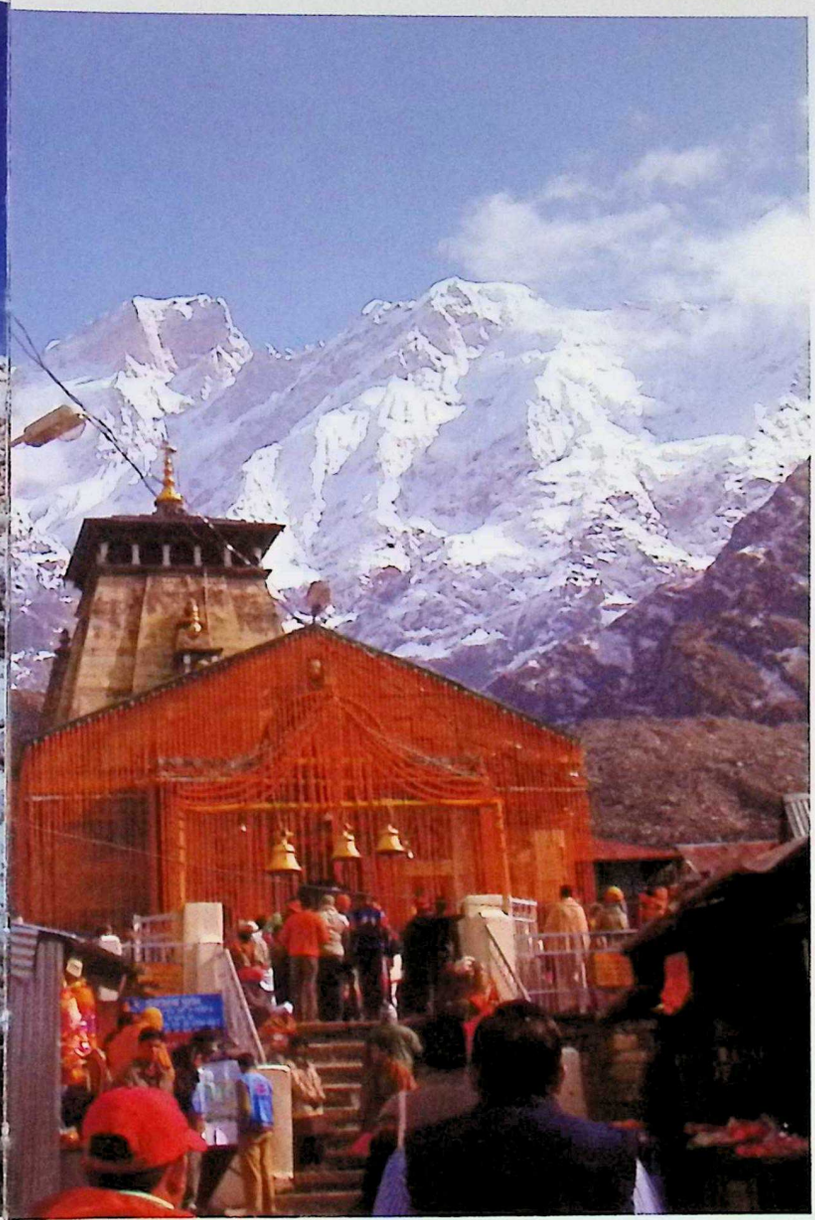

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HARIDWAR- THE CITY OF GANGA:

Gateway to Lord's Abode

The literal meaning of the place is 'gateway to Lord Vishnu's Abode'. Sages, seers and poets consider this place as special site for devotion and penance. Haridwar is a permanent dwelling place for many ascetics and hermits across the nation. Almost every religious sect of India has its ashram in the precincts of the holy city. It has drawn towards itself, a vast cross section of humanity.

Poised between the solitude of the Devabhoomi (abode of Gods) and the pulchritude of Maya Kshetra (the world of illusions), Haridwar has always attracted races for peace and physical well being. No wonder, this ancient place has been the site of action in many thousands of mythological and spiritual tales. It is here that after having thrown for more than 300kms through the deep Himalayan ranges and steep valleys, the holy Ganga reaches plain level.

The Holy Seven

The Ganges is personified as goddess in Indian mythology. Legends say that when Ganga reached Haridwar, she split herself into seven streams, with the aim of not disturbing the seven rishis (saints) engrossed in deep meditation. The Sapt Rishi Ashram at the northern end of the city in Sapt Sarovar area precisely marks the site. The main Neeldhara (blue stream) flows right beneath the Neel Parvat. It is said that Lord Shiva once sat in meditation on Neel Parvat and shadow of his body fell on river Ganga. The water immediately turned blue. Though expanding seamlessly the main city of Haridwar is located on the principal branch which forms a sweeping arc to reform the river about three kilometers downstream.

Haridwar is also marked as one of the seven sacred cities of India- the others being Ayodhya, Mathura and Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu , Dwarika in Gujarat and Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh.

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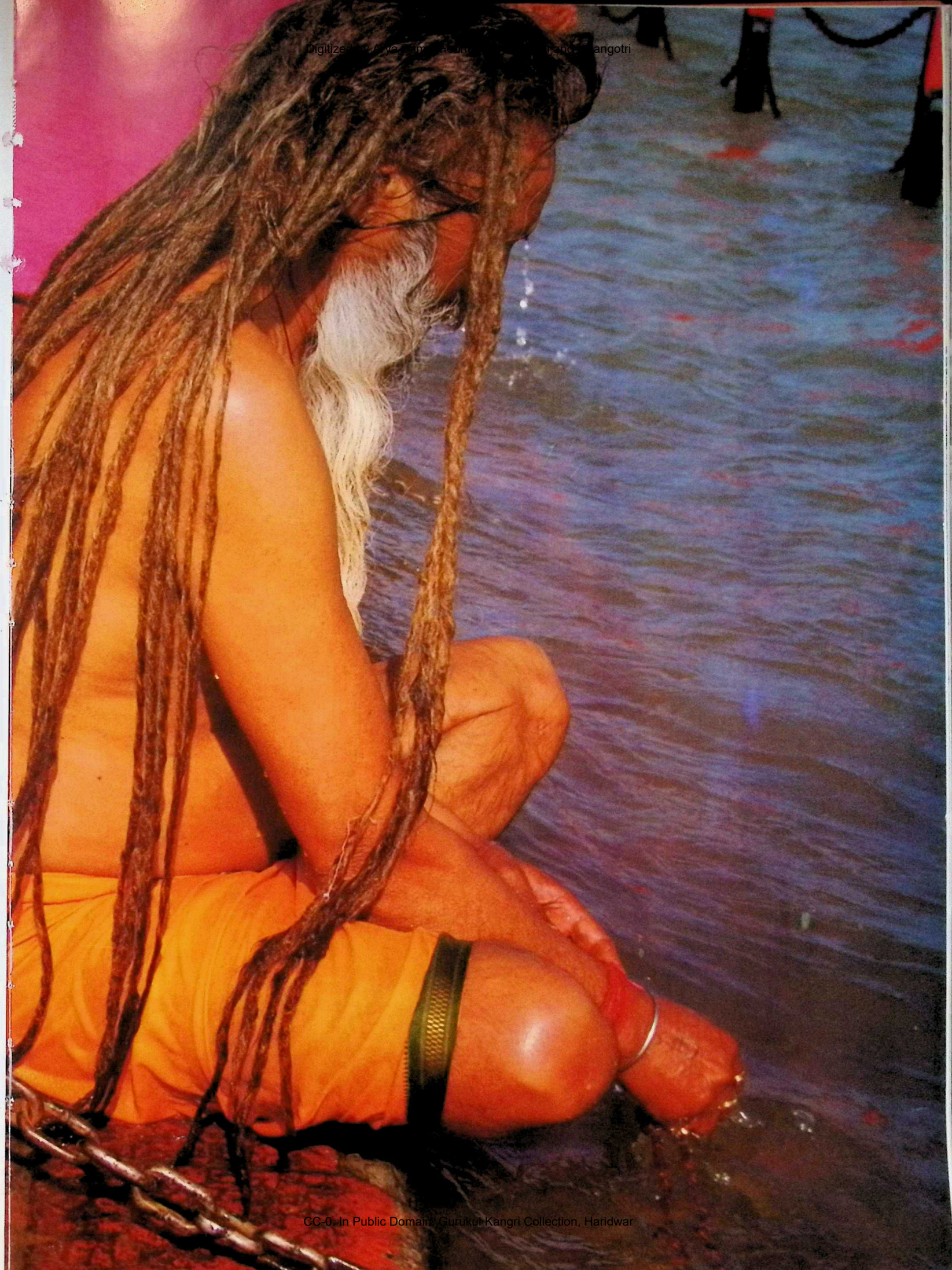

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Previous Page: An ascetic with matted locks worships on banks of Ganges
Above: Evening Prayer being performed on banks of Ganges

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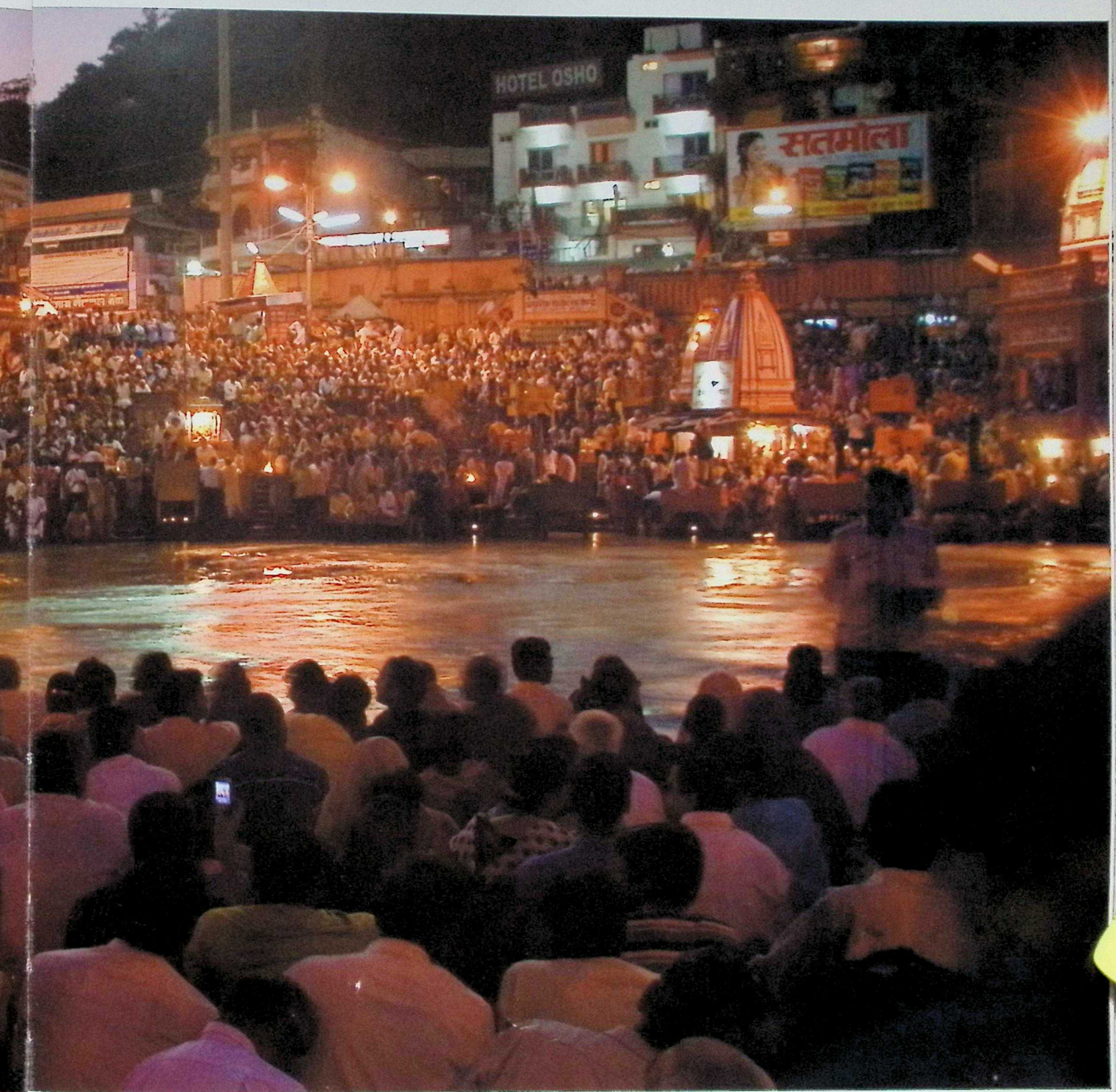

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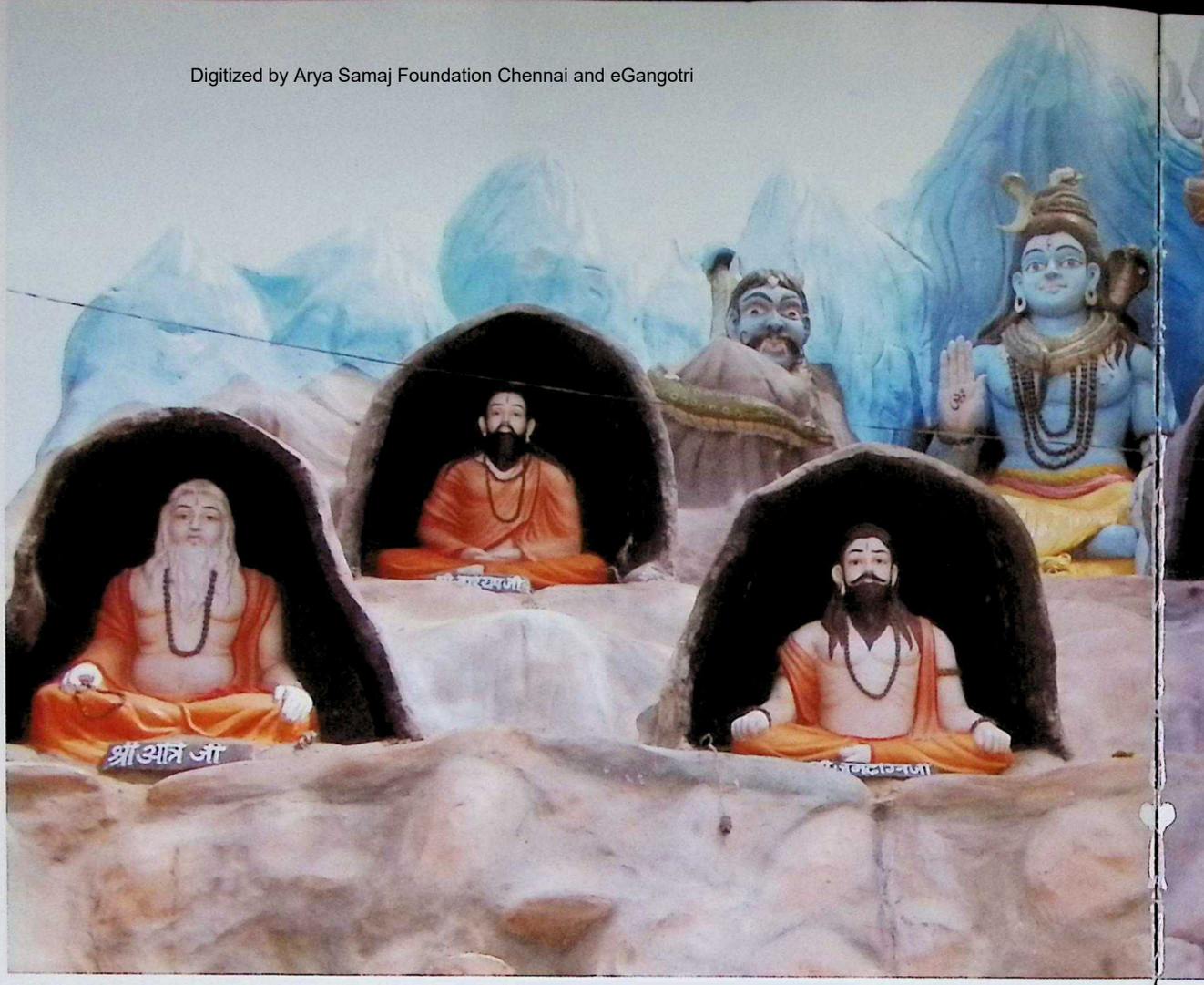

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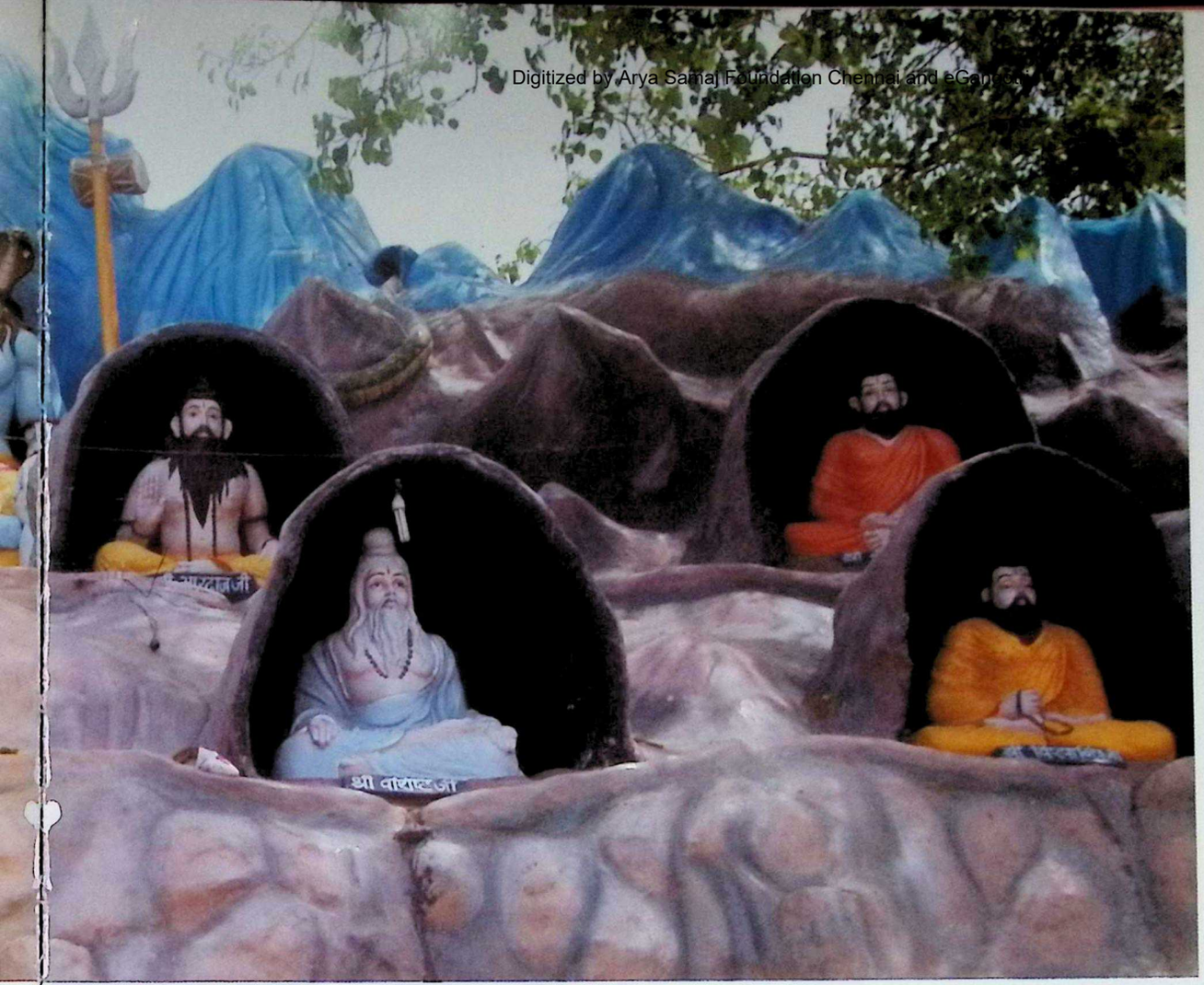

Top: Sculptures of the seven rishis(sages) in meditation posture at sapt sarover area.
Left: Historic sapt rishi ashram at the northern end of the city in sapt sarover area of Haridwar

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Shiva and Shankaracharya on holiness of Ganga

In this sanctum lies the assurance of release for the mortal beings from the implacable cycle of birth and rebirth. The scriptures extol this place as sacred even to the Gods.

In the Shiv Purana a reference comes where Lord Shiva himself says, "Once when I wanted the holy city which is the sanctuary of Keshava (Vishnu), I took the form of Vishnu. Haridwar is also a grand pilgrimage place of mine, which bestows the four goals in Kaliyuga; it gives Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha to the people where the pristine and joyous Ganga flows perennially. Those who listen to the 'mahatmaya' (glory) of the place obtain the same fruit as offering done in Ashvamedha Yajna(horse sacrifice) or giving away thousand cows."

Adi Shankaracharya of 8th century in verse 20 of his Moha Mudgara says:

"Bhagavadgita kinchidadheeta Gangaajal lavakanika peetaa,
kriyate tasa muraarisamarchaa kriate rasya yamena na vharchaa."

This means "to one who has studied the Bhagavadgita even a little, who has sipped at least a drop of Ganges water, who has worshipped at least once Lord Murari, there is no quarrel with Yama, the Lord of Death."

Even in the epic like Mahabharata it is mentioned that Arjuna came to Haridwar during his exile period of one year. As he was taking dip in Ganga, enchanting snake princess Ulupi appeared from Ganga. She enticed him to follow her into the deep and watery kingdom of the snakes.

Vidur is said to have recited the Mahabharata to sage Maitrayi while sage Narada heard the epic from the seven rishis at Sapt ashram. The Pandavas performed penance at Saptrishi ashram and attained release from their bodies.

Lord Rama visited Haridwar to atone from the sin of killing Ravana a Brahman, and he bathed in Ganga to absolve his sin. These myths and epics resist rationalization.

Chinese pilgrim Huein Tsang on his visit in AD 634 left an individual record. He called the place Mo-yu-io, which is the chinese equivalent of the word Mayapur, though he also mentioned the name of Gangadwar. Huein Tsang described the city as an important centre of the time, well populated and three miles in circumference, with a grand temple-possibly the Maya Devi temple- in the northern part. Pilgrims thronged the city and sought the benediction of the Ganga. "There are," he wrote, "always hundreds of thousands of the people gathered here from distance quarters to bathe to and wash in its water. Benevolent kings have found there a house of merit (punyashala)."

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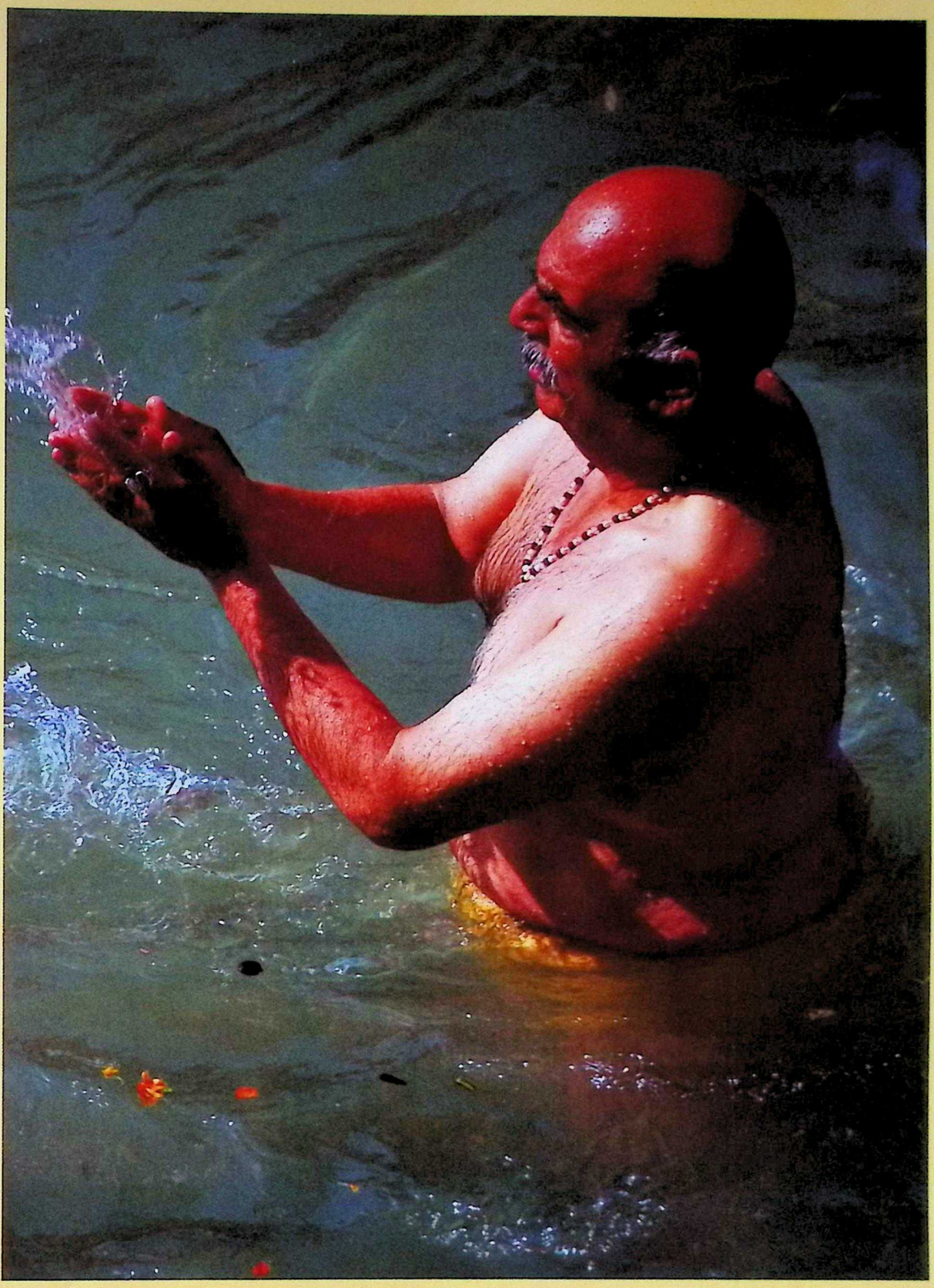

Devotee greeting the holy river before taking a dip

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Above: A religious sect taking bath

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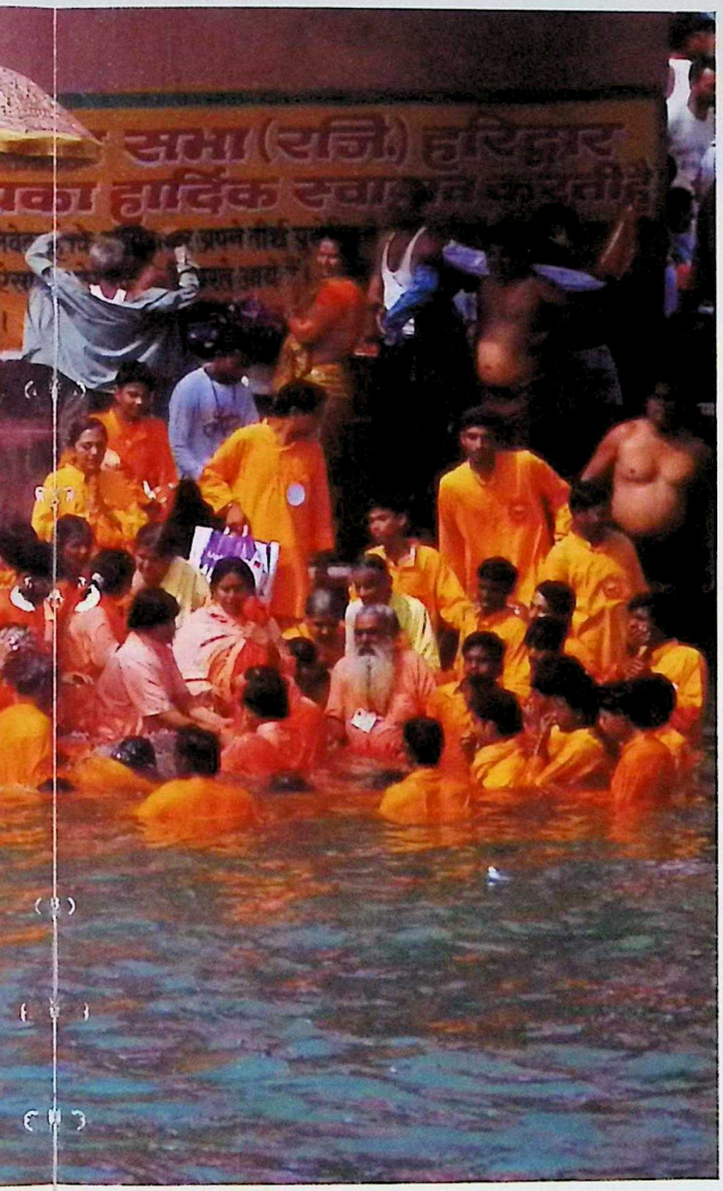

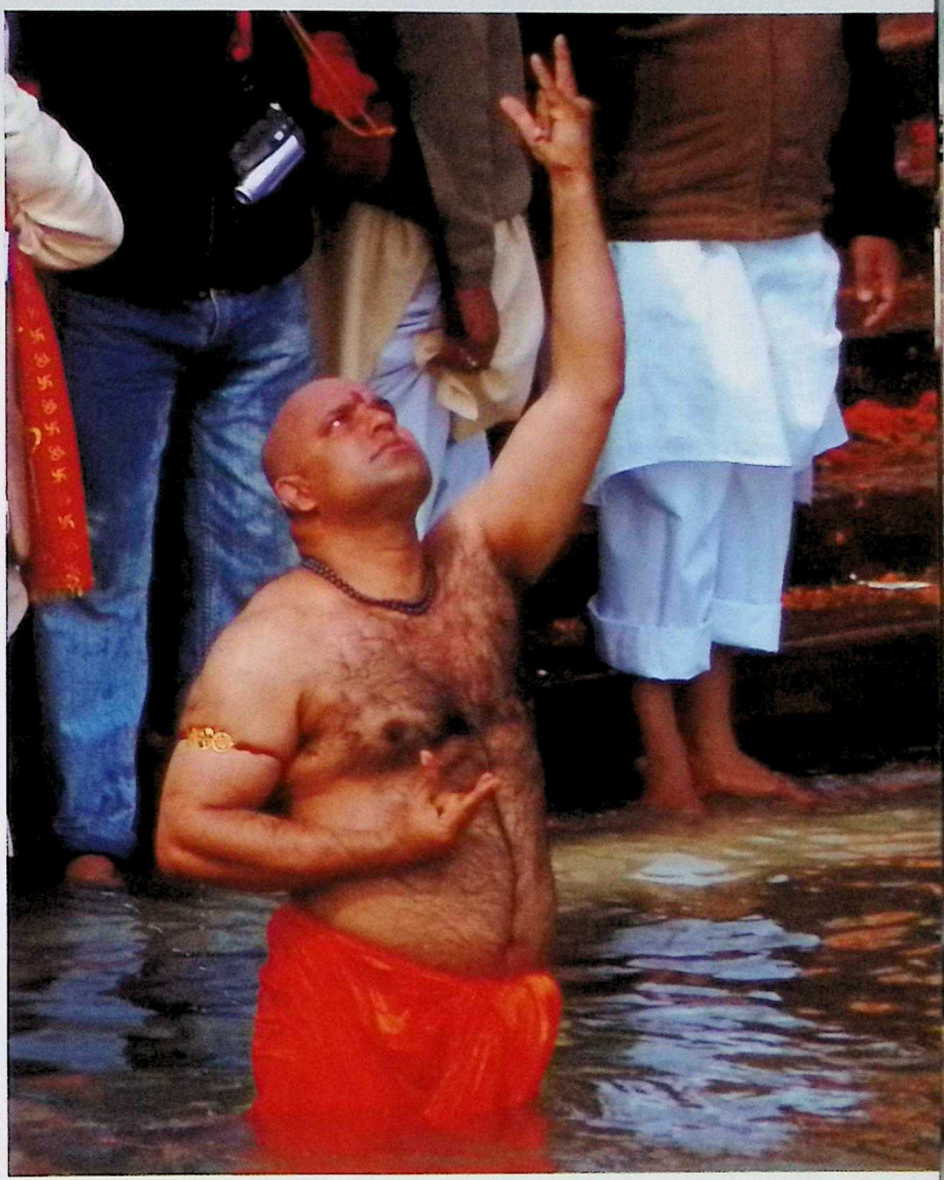

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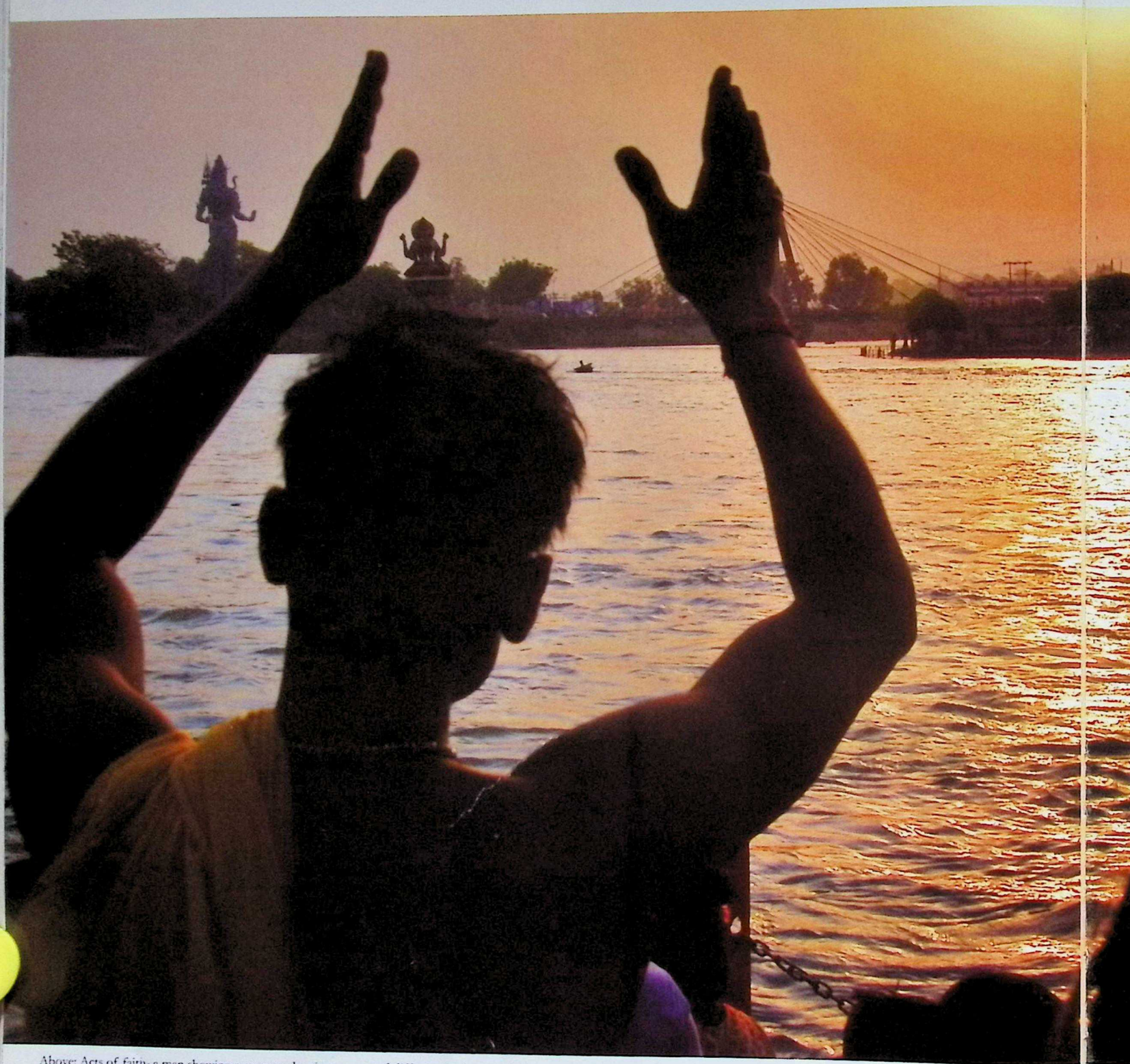

Above: Acts of faith- a man showing respect to the giant statues of different deities placed around main bathing area
Right Top: A devotee offering prayers at the river
Right Bottom: A person offering holy fire, some flowers and sweets in his hands to the river Ganges

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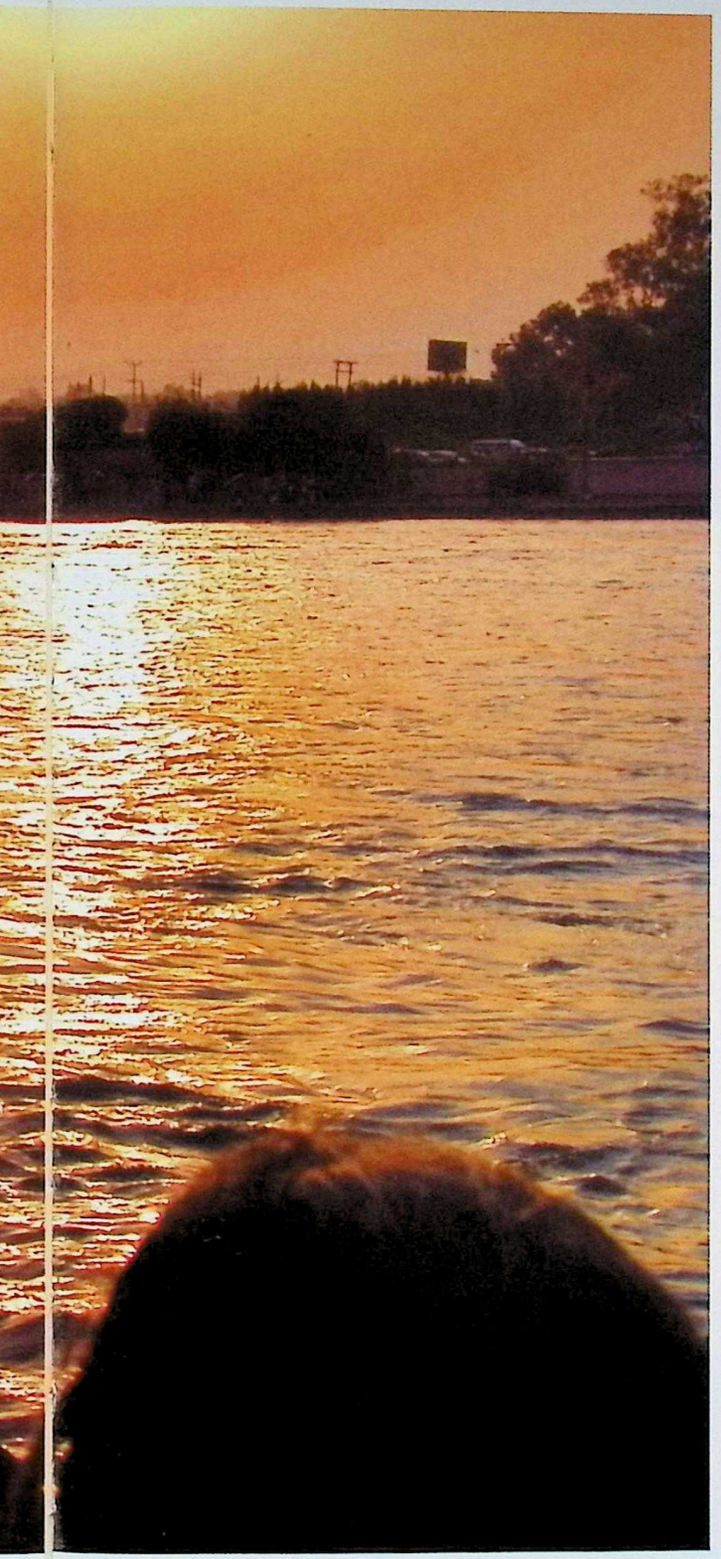

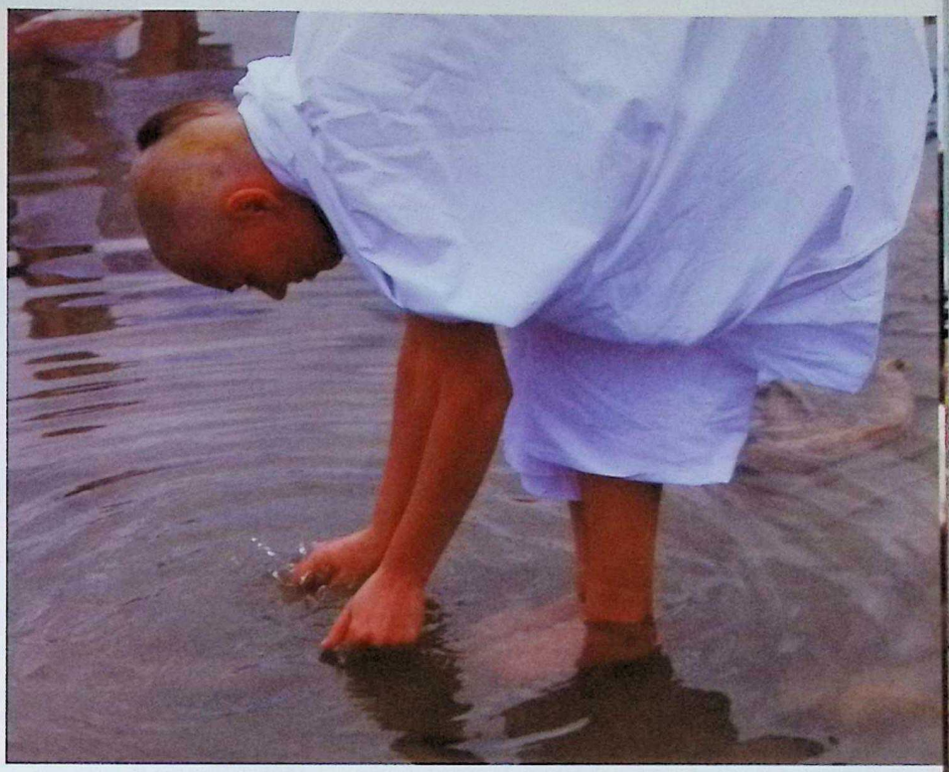

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Ganga Avataran (The descent of Ganga from Himalayas)

Ganga as Janhvi

As is often the case, mythological, historical and geological views overlap at place and are divergent at other points. The story of descent of Ganga from the Himalayas seems to be set in geographical reality. According to a common belief, the Ganga got locked in the matted hair of Lord Shiva. Jahnu Rishi got her free and allowed her to flow again. Hence Ganga got its synonym as 'Janhvi'.

As per the records in Kedar Purana, in ancient times Rishi Jahnu had his ashram on bank of the river on the way to Gangotri. When the flood came and the Ganga swept away the rishi's hut he got so angry that he drank up the entire river. Thus Ganga became invisible. Raja Bharthari pleaded to rishi requesting him to let Ganga go, the rishi obliged by cutting his thigh and letting the Ganga flow. It can be said that the rishi may have been helpful in changing the course of the Ganga.

The descent of Bhagirathi from Himalayas

Mythology says that the life giving water of the holy Ganga descended on earth as a reward for several penances. In the ancient era, kings used to perform Ashvamedha Yajna to become victorious. A horse was set free to wander and if not challenged, the area through which it travelled became part of the territory of the king who performed the yajna. King Sagar, the ancestor of Lord Rama performed this Yajna and when Indra, the King of Gods, felt threatened by this act of Sagar seemingly aspiring to become Digvijayi (winner of North, South, East and West directions), he sabotaged the sacrifice by confining the horse to the hermitage of Kapil Muni.

When Sagar reached the horse, they found it tied to the hermitage of sage Kapil. Deeming the sage to be culprit, they tied him and the grand sage's fierce gaze incinerated all of them. Fearing that their souls would roam about the world, their ashes were immersed in Ganga. Efforts were made to bring the holy river down to the earth. Finally, it was Bhagirath, the son of Dilip, who realized that the holy water of Ganga alone would bestow salvation on his ancestors and bring prosperity to earth. Bhagirath went to the Himalaya and performed penance for ten thousand years. Pleased by his austerities, Lord Brahma granted him Ganga. But he also reckoned that the earth would not be able to withstand the shock of her fall from heaven. So Shiva received the full impact of cascading torrent on his head. So winding through the labyrinth of his matted hair, the river lost its force and descended gently on earth, bestowing life along her course.

Ganga evolved from Shiva's Matted Locks

In some versions of myth, it is said the Shiva held Ganga in his locked, matted hair –symbolic of the Himalaya - at Gangadwar. Gangadwar means the gateway to Ganga, and is another name for Haridwar. In another version, Haridwar is also referred to as Kapilasthan, the place where the sage Kapila had his hermitage. In most myths, however, Kapilasthan is at Gangasagar where the Ganga merges with the ocean.

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A picturesque scene of descent of Ganga of Bhuma Niketan Sapt sarover area of Haridwar

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Magnificent statue of Lord Shiva

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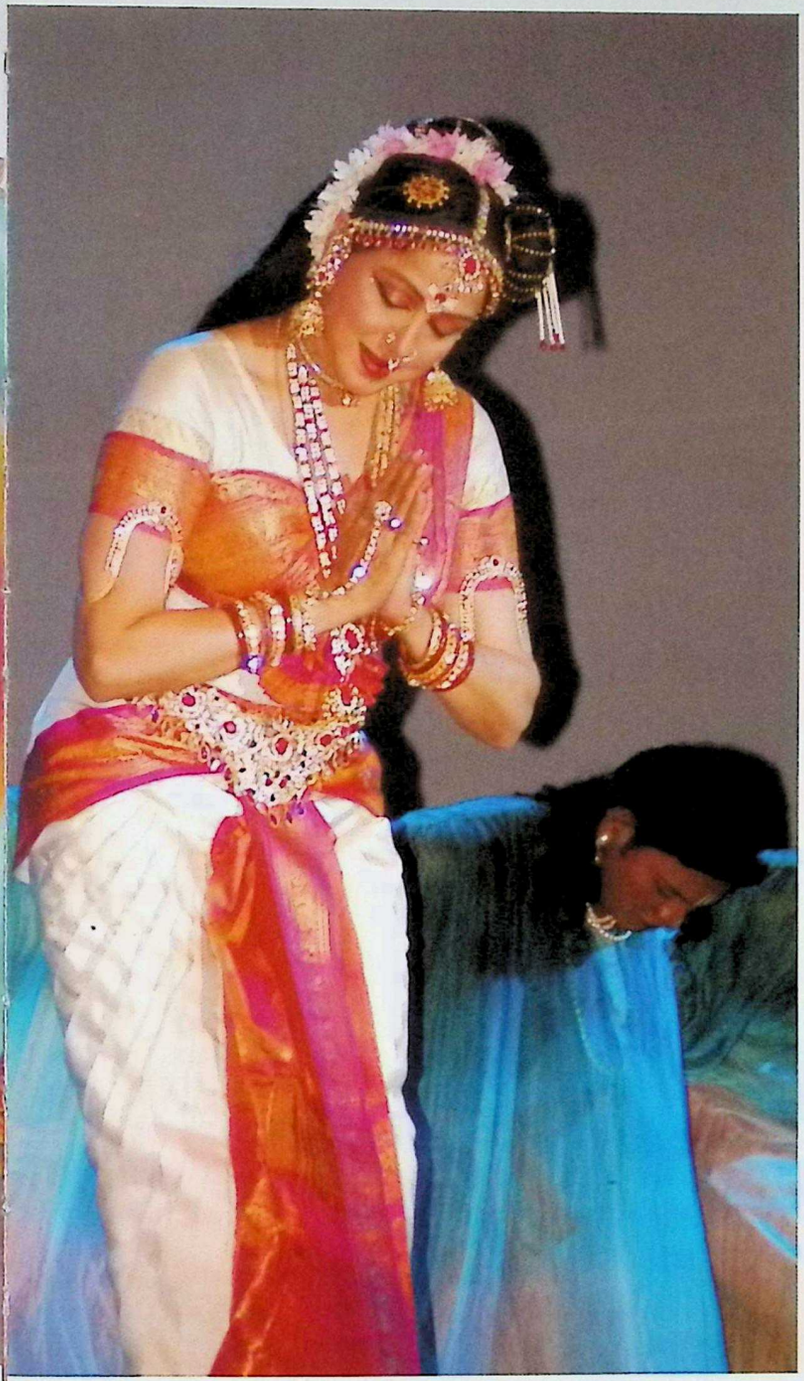

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Historical Temples on the Banks of Ganges

Kankhal. A quite suburb of Haridwar, was at one time the capital of Prajapati Daksh. He loathed the idea of the divine yogi Lord Shiva for as his son-in-law and husband for his daughter, Sati. He did not want to get his daughter married to one who frequented cremation ground, whose body was smeared with ashes, whose hair was matted and who clothed himself with tiger skin.

Once Daksh performed a yajna, a great sacrifice from which he deliberately excluded Lord Shiva. When Sati heard of this she went to Kankhal against her husband's wishes. She was enraged to discover that no part of sacrificial offering had been reserved for Shiva. Worse still, she found her father criticizing Shiva before the august gathering.

Unable to suffer this grave insult, she hurled herself into the sacrificial fire. Virbhadra, Shiva's leading celestial host, descended on the site, destroyed the sacrifice and beheaded Daksh. Shiva himself appeared at the site. Raged and aggrieved, he flung the charred body of Sati on his shoulder and roamed about the entire Universe. Slowly his grief was transmuted to wrath. In an effect to preempt the impact that would be unleashed by Shiva's wrath, Lord Vishnu used his powerful weapon, the Sudarshana Chakra to cut Sati's body. Mahamaya Sati as she is also known thus receded from Shiva's thoughts.

Maya Devi Temple. Followers of the Shakti cult established a shakti peeth – a seat of Shakti – wherever parts of Sati's body fell. Shakti symbolizes the primordial female activating energy. The heart and the navel of Sati fell in Haridwar and the spot is marked by the Maya Devi Temple, the oldest and the most revered one in the city.

Meanwhile, Shiva restored his father-in-law to life by giving him a goat's head. Overwhelmed by gratitude, Daksh consecrated a Shivalinga at the place of sacrifice where Daksh Temple now stands.

Mansa Devi Temple. Located on a hillock, Mansa Devi temple is the most frequently visited temple in navratras and can be reached by a cable car or road. Goddess Mansa Devi, wife of the Nag King Vasuki, is believed to fulfill the wishes of devotees visiting her temple. To seek the blessings of the Goddess and get their wishes fulfilled, the devotees tie sacred threads on the sacred tree that stands proud in the temple premises. Once the wishes are fulfilled, the devotees mark respect by returning to the tree to untie the threads.

A picturesque view of Haridwar awaits those visiting this temple. Navratras (nine days devoted to Goddess Shakti Mata) are special days when the temple witnesses serpentine queues of devotees. Mansa Devi temple is one vertex of the Siddhapeeth triangle formed between three temples, Chandi Devi and Maya Devi temples being the other two.

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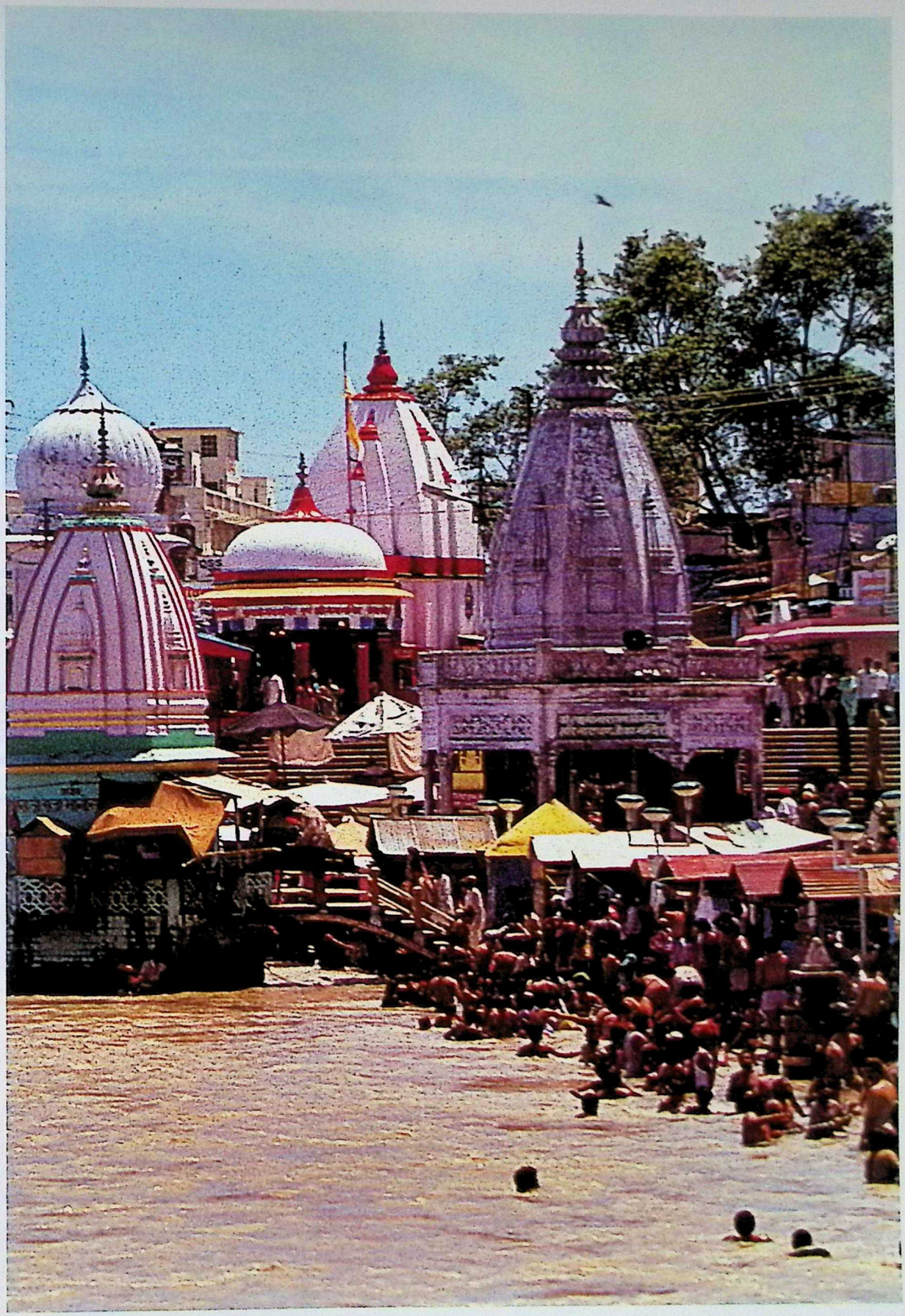

The temples near main bathing area called 'Brahma-kund' at Har ki pauri.

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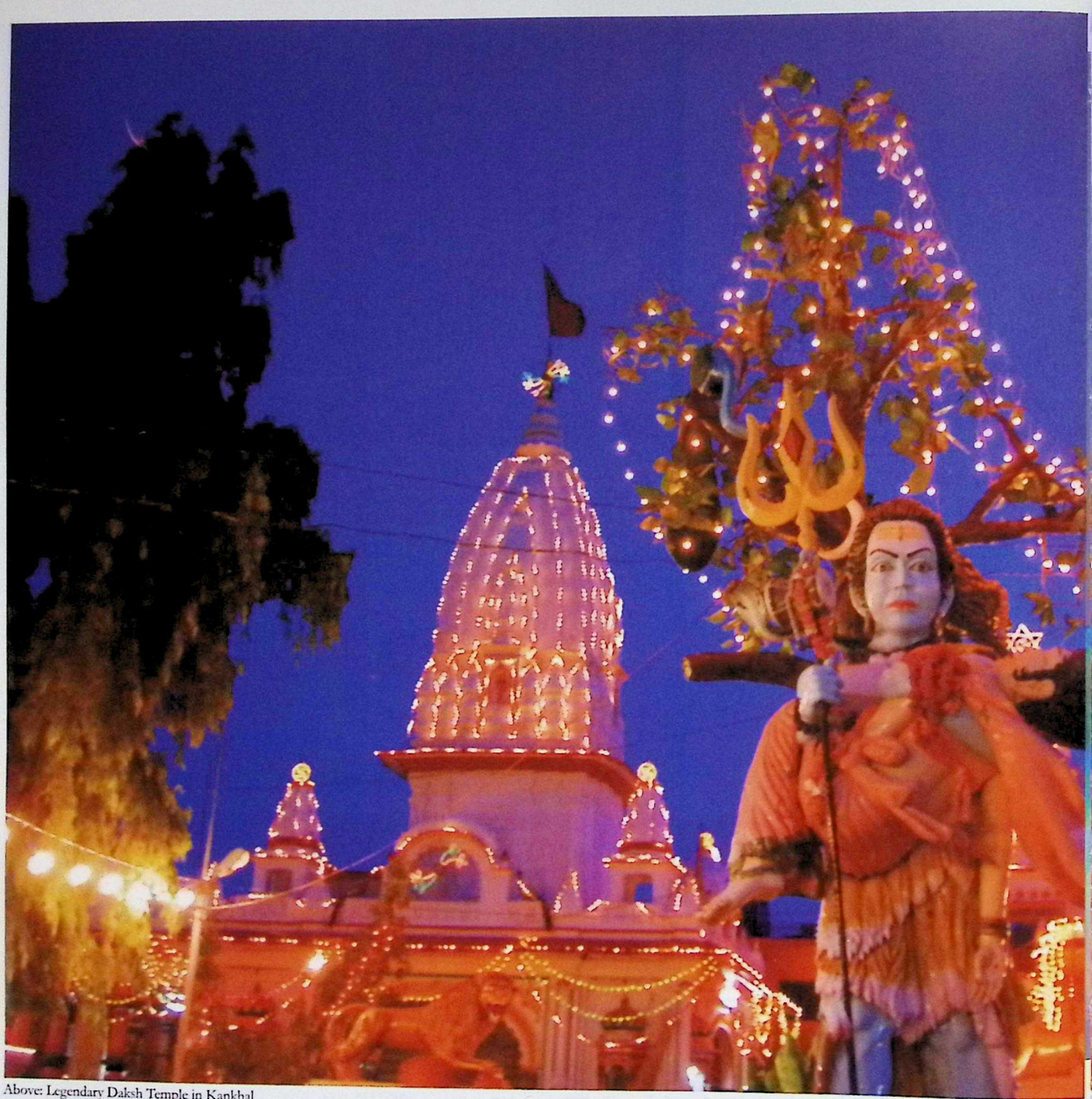

Above: Legendary Daksh Temple in Kankhal
Right Bottom: Famous wish-fulfilling Mansa devi temple on hillock

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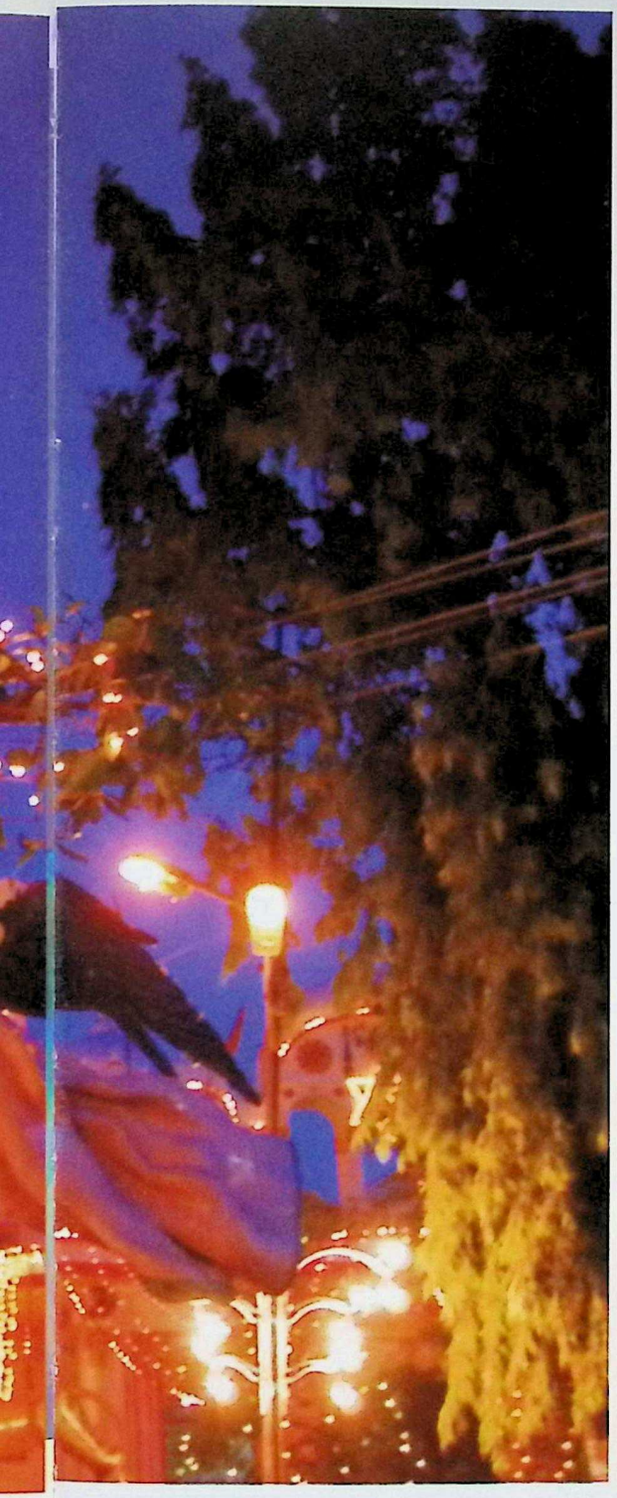

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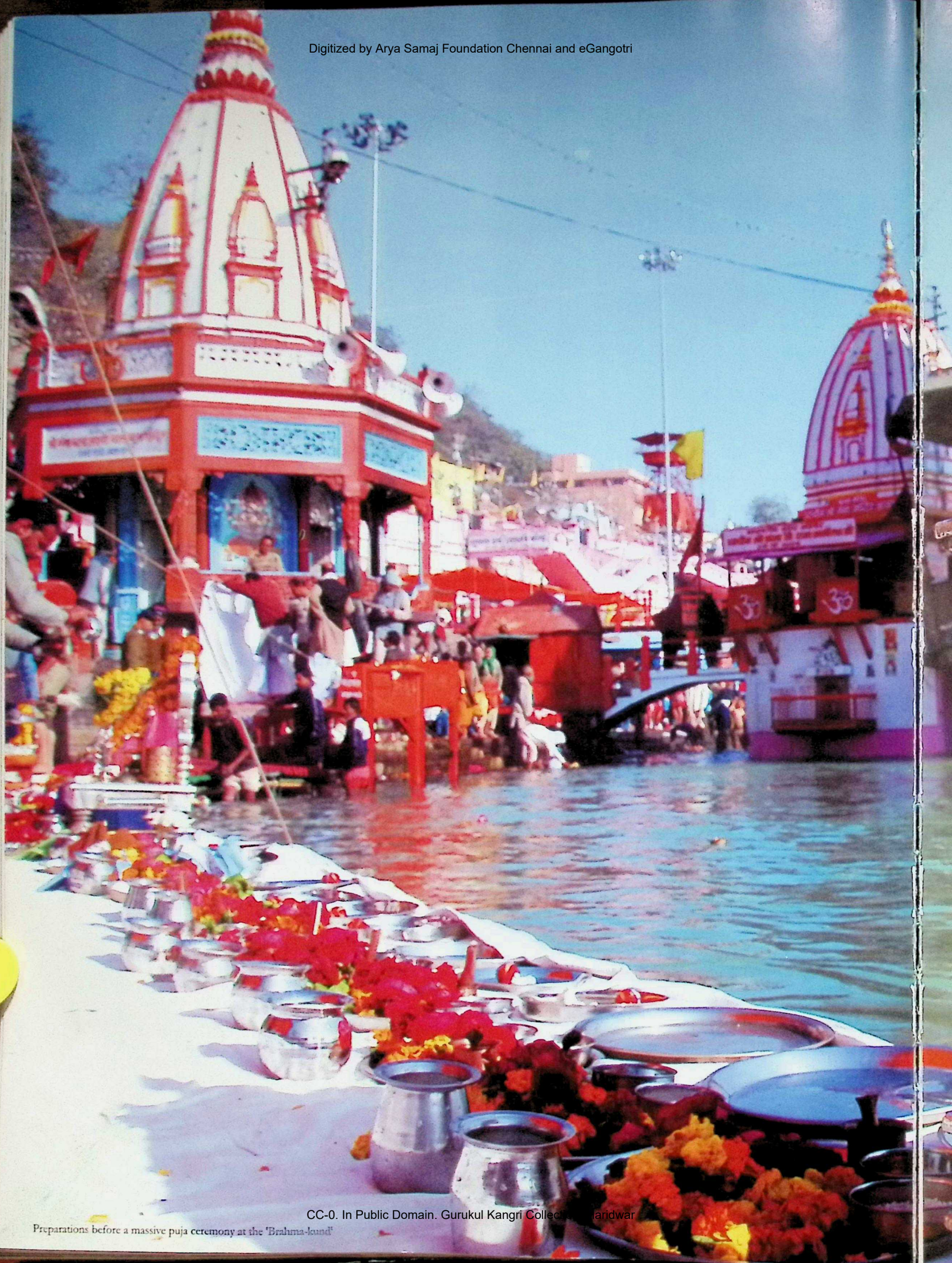

Preparations before a massive puja ceremony at the 'Brahma-kund'

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Chandi Devi Temple on Neel Parvat. The temple is dedicated to Goddess Chandi who sits atop the 'Neel Parvat' on the eastern bank of river Ganga. It was constructed in 1929 A.D. by the king of Kashmir, Suchat Singh. Skanda Purana gives reference of a legend, in which Chanda-Munda, the army chief of demon kings Shumbh and Nishumbha were killed by Goddess Chandi here. The temple got the name Chandi Devi after this incidence. It is believed that the main statue was established by Adi Shankracharya in 8th century A.D. The temple is a 3 km trek from Chandighat and can also be reached through a ropeway. Both Mansa Devi and Chandi Devi are on the opposite sides of the river Ganges and night lights portray a picturesque view from Har Ki Pauri.

Navratras (Nine auspicious days of Goddess Shakti) during Kumbh Mela

During Kumbh mela held on March 14, 2010, Bharateeya Nav Varsh (Hindu New Year) began. Coincidentally, it was also the first navratra. Devotees thronged the temples of Goddesses Chandi Devi and Mansa Devi.

"Beginning of Nav Samvatsar during Kumbh mela is very auspicious," says the Shankaracharya of Puri Matth.

According to Swami Adhyokshjananda, "Nine days of navratras are devoted to the Goddess Shakti without whose power; even Shiva is like a shav (corpse). These goddesses represent 10 mahavidyas (skills). Adi Shankaracharya advocated performing of yajna for Raj Rajeshwari Tripur Sundari to get eternal bliss and prosperity. Also for this Kumbh mela, to evade any natural disaster, yajna is performed."

The nine-day festival of Navratras in Hindu religion is dedicated to the nine manifestations of Goddess Durga which are Shailputri, Brahmacharini, Chandraghanta, Kushmanda, Skandmata, Katyayani, Kalratri, Mahagauri, Siddhidatri.

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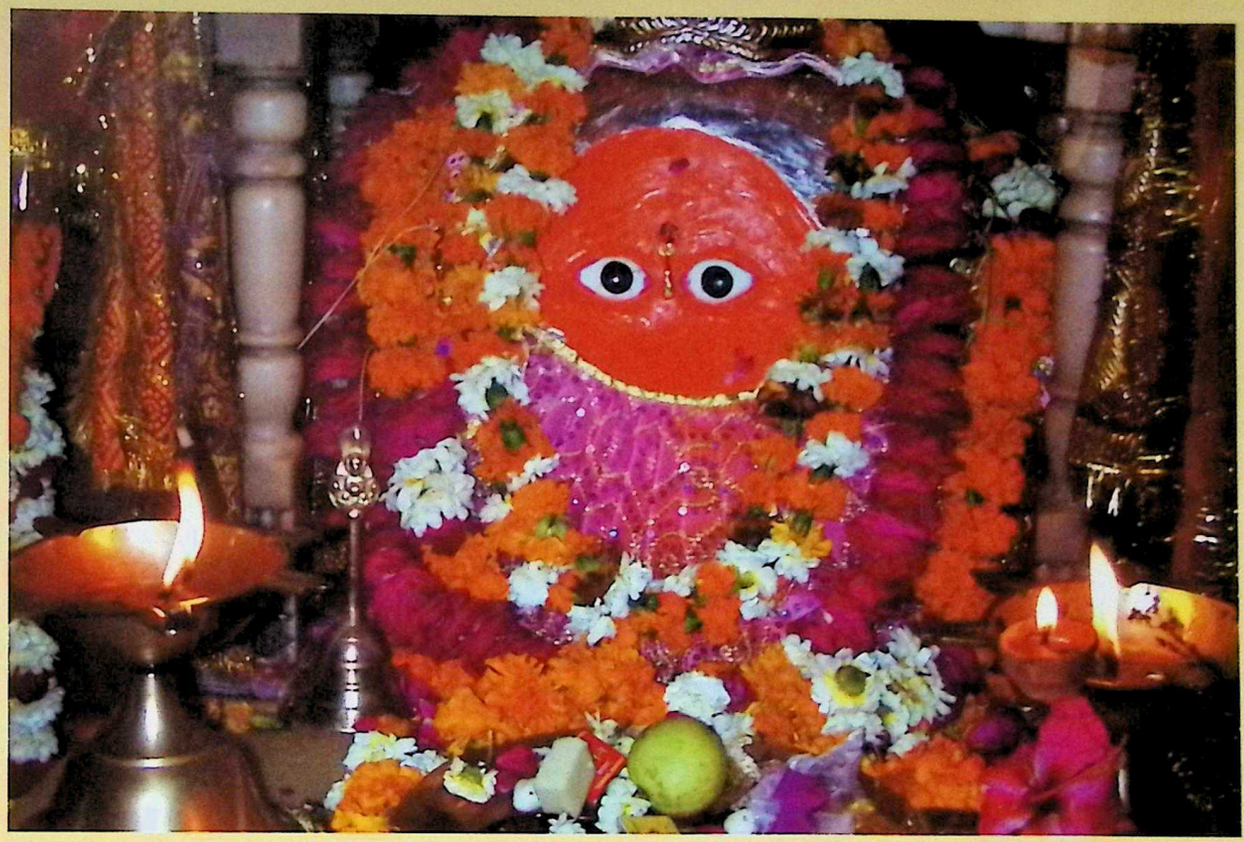

Top: Goddess Chandi devi at Neel parvat (Shivalik hills)
Above: Idol of Maya devi at famous Mayadevi temple

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Indian tradition of worshiping the goddess Ganges and submerging it's statue after the ceremony.

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Rishikesh - An age old Spiritual Sanctuary

Most pilgrims, who come to Haridwar for the Kumbh usually, extend their pilgrimage to include Rishikesh, Muni-Ki-Reti, Laxmanjhoola and Ramjhoola. Even the Kumbh Nagar of Haridwar was stretched till Rishikesh. Those en route to the Himalayan shrines must go via Rishikesh. Char Dham Yatra (pilgrimage to the four shrines) that begins from Rishikesh which is 28 kilometres north of Haridwar situated alongside Ganga River. The road to Rishikesh cuts across thick forests and open cultivated fields. This is also a town of temples and ashrams, and it gained worldwide attention when the Beatles came to the ashram of Mahesh Yogi. The scenic beauty of Rishikesh is enhanced by the Chandrabharga River, which merges into the Ganga here. According to a myth, the sage Raibhya performed penance here and God appeared before him in the form of Hrishikesh (which means, the one with the bristling hair), an epithet of Vishnu. The area has since been known by this name.

Bharata, the brother of Lord Rama also performed penance here, on the spot where the Bharata Mandir now stands. The temple is one of the oldest in Rishikesh and a town grew around it. Rama himself is believed to have bathed in the Rishikund, the pond in front of the Raghunath Mandir. This is another important temple, near the sacred Triveni Ghat where river Ganga flows broad and swift. Like Haridwar, Rishikesh has been, and still is, a retreat for sages.

Arti on the Banks of Ganges

It is here in Rishikesh that the river leaves the Shivalik Mountains and flows out into the plains of northern India. Triveni Ghat is believed to be the confluence point of Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati rivers. Hence, it is a sacred bathing spot and turns spectacular in the evening when Arti ceremony (worship of Ganga with butter lamps) is performed at the banks of the Ganges. Amidst the sound of temple bells drifting across the holy waters, the ritual act of Arti involves a flame, symbolic of an individual soul, being waved before the form of deity. The scented deep-red roses and golden marigolds are offered to Ganga Mata by devotees as an expression of their life and devotion. The daintily packaged hand- made leaf baskets containing rose petals and a small wick candle (diya) floating like stars on the dancing waves of the river is a sight to behold.

Swami Shivananda's Personal Account on Rishikesh

In his autobiography, Swami Sivanada, founder of the Divine Life Society, explains why he chose to stay here. In his own words:

"I came to Rishikesh in June 1924 and found it my destination. My guru gave me initiation and enough spiritual strength and blessings…Rishikesh is a holy place with many Mahatmas. There are almshouses that provide free food for all sadhus, yogis and aspirants. They can stay in any of the almshouses or kutirs. They can even have their own thatched cottages and huts at any place. Near Rishikesh there are charming places like Brahmapuri Forest, Nilakantha, Vashistha Gufa and Tapovanam. Sadhus who stay in such places get their dry rations once in fifteen days and prepare their own food. The scenery of the river is charming and soul elevating. The holy Ganga is a great blessing. One can spend hours in contemplation, sitting on a rock or on a sandbank besides River Ganga. There are some libraries from where we can get authoritative works in Sanskrit, English and Hindi on yoga and philosophy. Some learned mahatmas conduct regular, daily classes and give private tuition to deserving students. The climate of the place is fine…. There are Allopathic and Ayurveda hospitals to attend to the sick. Thus I found Rishikesh an ideal place for intense and undisturbed spiritual practices for all seekers of truth."

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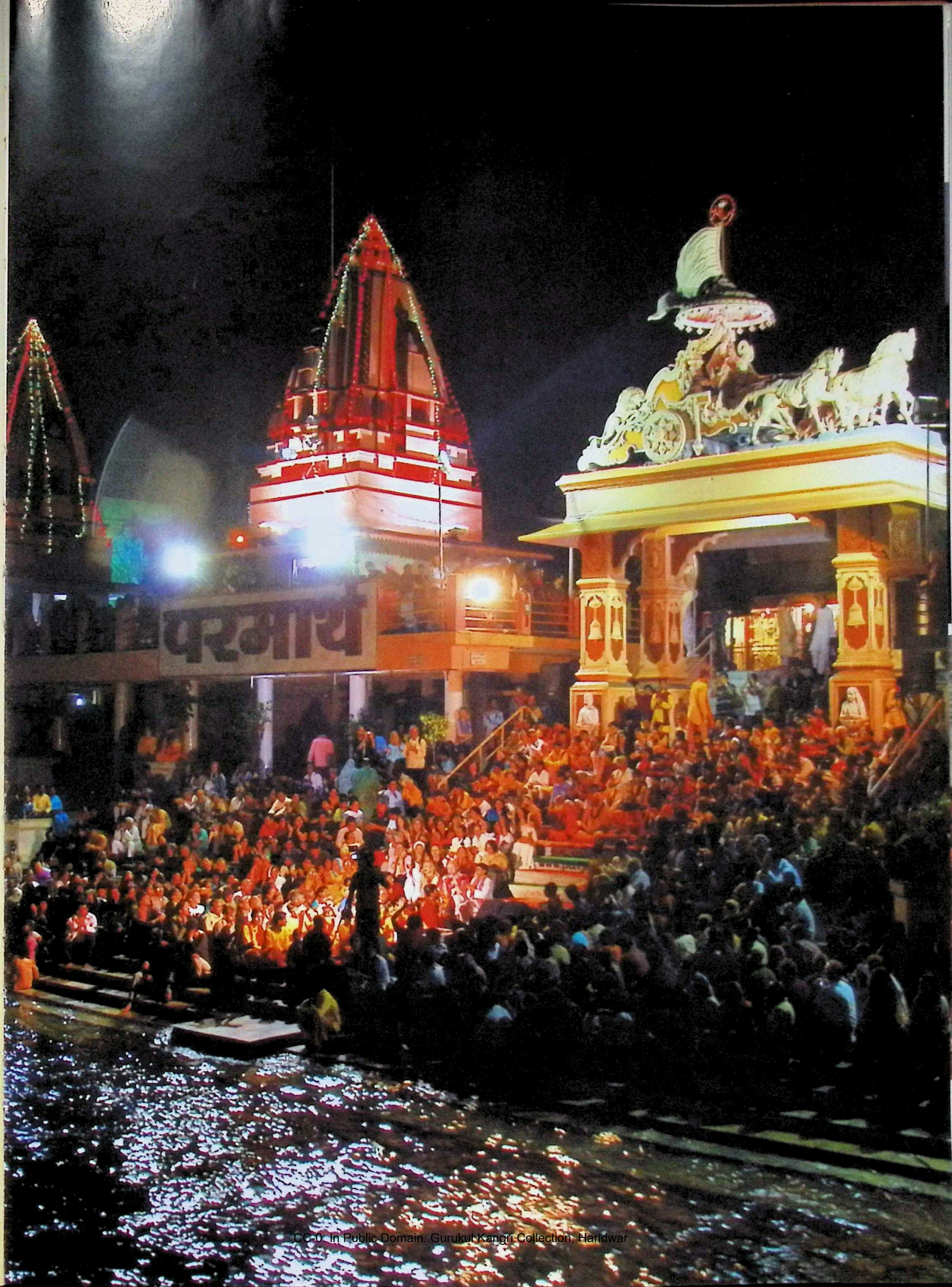

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Previous Page: Parmarth Niketan Ghat Rishikesh- Evening Prayer
Above: Lord Shiva in meditative pose, symbol of eternal peace and tranquility

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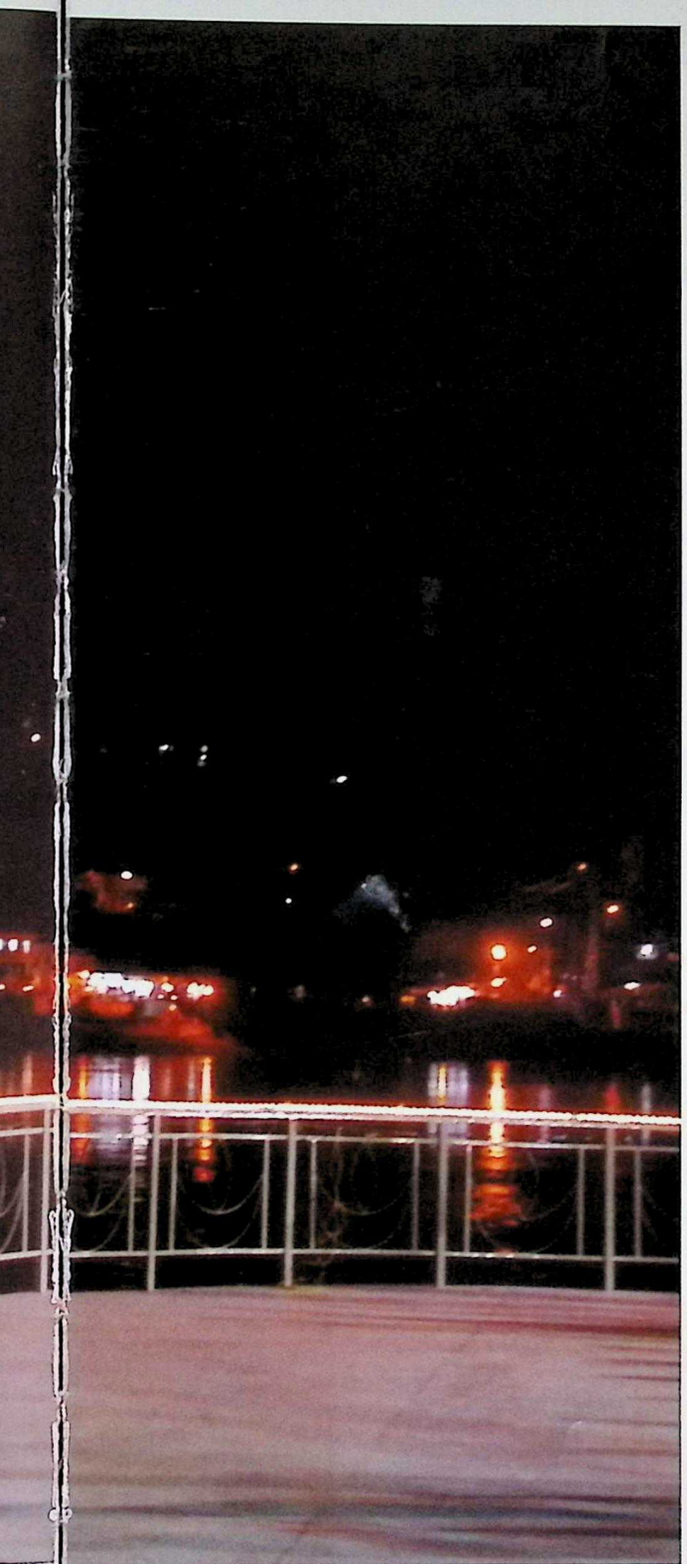

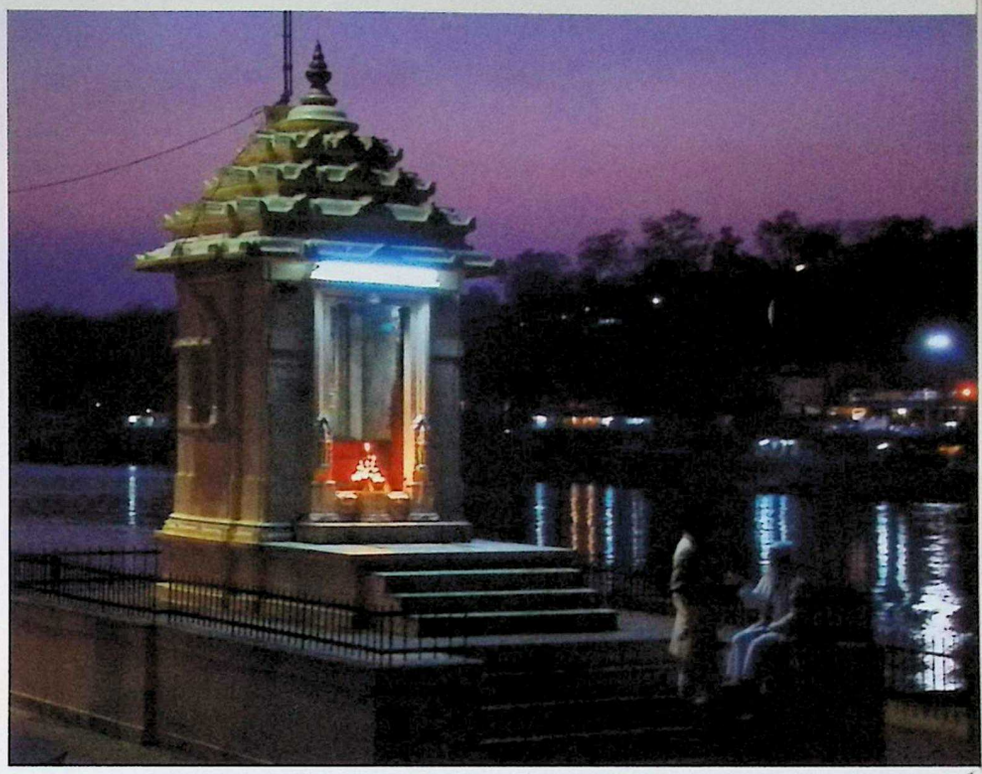

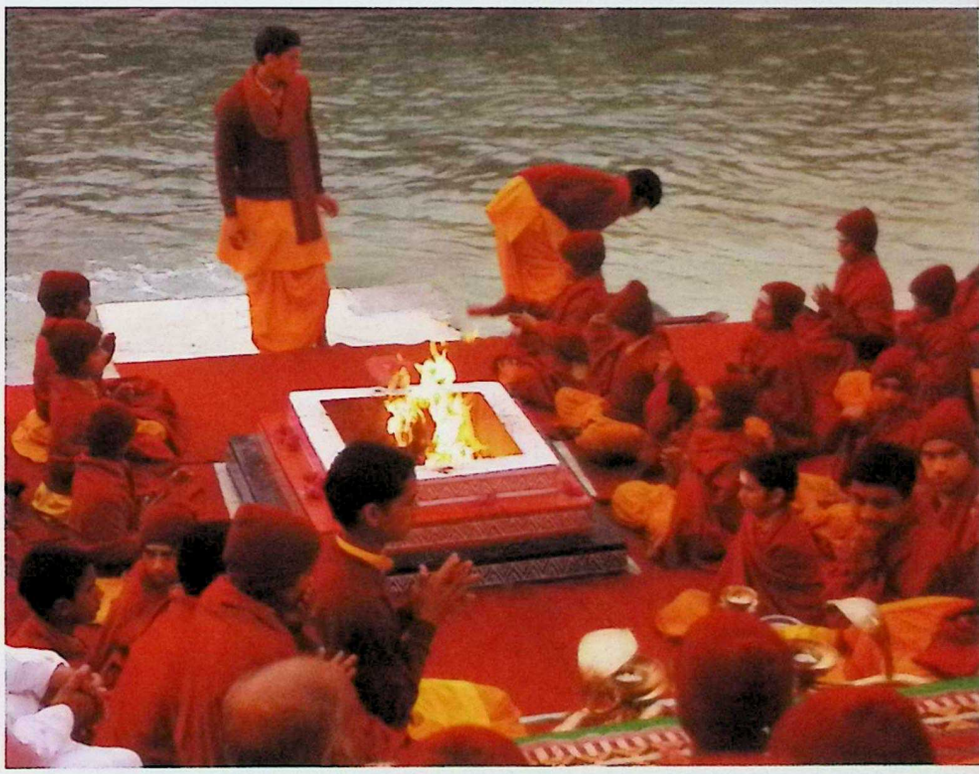

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A Hub of Yoga and Meditation Centres

For many, Rishikesh is synonymous with yoga and meditation centres. There are numerous ashrams giving instruction in yoga. The term Yoga is derived from the root YUJ which means to yoke, to come into union or in conjunction with. It is a strict spiritual discipline, practiced in order to gain control over one's being, to gain occult powers, to dominate certain specific forces of nature, but mainly to attain unity with the universal spirit. There are people from different parts of the world staying at Rishikesh. The Divine Life Society with its Yoga-Vedanta Forest University and ashram at Sivanandanagar is especially popular with foreigners.

Having saturated themselves with the traditional spas and naturotherapy farms, busy executives from all over the country are now seeking exotic getaways of peace, enlightenment and past-life workshops, attending inner engineering programs, visiting the hills especially Rishikesh to do nothing but yoga or meditation.

Boosted over decades by visits from international celebrities, and with the coming of Beatles and their group in 1968 to stay at Maharshi Yogi's ashram at this particularly holy city, it has already reached the international media.

The Annual International Yoga Festival which spans up to seven days is a major event of the town. It is jointly organized by Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board and Parmarth Niketan Ashram. The festival was first organized in 2001 and since then it is being held every year.

Noteworthy Ashrams and Missions

The other important ashrams and missions include the Kailashananda Mission Trust; Parmarth Niketan, Gita Bhawan, Baba Kali Kamliwali, Panchayati Kshetra, Saccha Dham, Geeta Ashram, Omkarananda Ashram and the Mahesh Yogi Ashram. At Laxmanjhoola, three kilometers upstream, a rope bridge of this name links the narrow gorge through which the River Ganga flows. Laxman, Rama's brother is believed to have done penance here. The previous bridge was washed away in the flood of 1924; the present one is suspended well above the high – water mark. The bridge, and a thirteen – storey temple nearby are great attractions for pilgrims and tourists. In 1986, a new rope bridge, the Shivananda Jhoola or Ramjhoola, was built one kilometer downstream. The natural beauty of Laxmanjhoola is being steadily eroded; but beside the river, far below the crowds, one can know that Ganga is a great blessing provided we conserve it. The road from Haridwar to Rishikesh also cuts across part of the vast Rajaji National Park. It can be visited at Chilla (Hydel Power Project), across Ganga at Haridwar. The River Ganga flows through the park, which is clothed with dry-mixed deciduous, scrub and grassland at the lower reaches and pine in the upper reaches. It has a large population of wild elephants which often descend to sub-montane regions and destroy standing crops sugarcane in particular. Leopards are sighted from time to time. The park has a wide variety of deer and birdlife. Villagers have encroached upon the park to graze their cattle, but there are still vast tracts unspoiled by humans.

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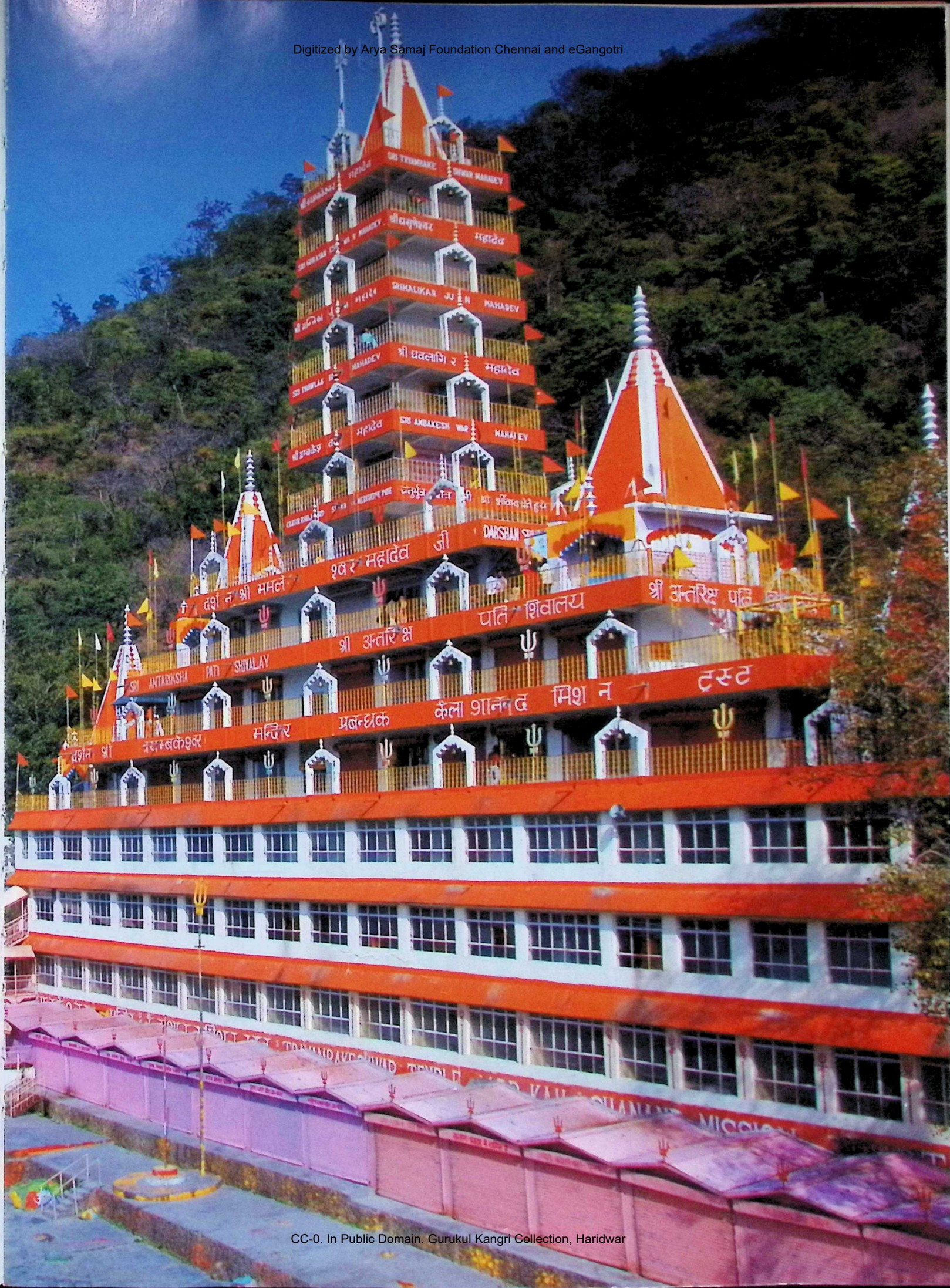

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Previous Page: 13 Storeyed Trayambekeshwar temple of Kailashanand Trust
Above & Right: Colors of faith- various devotees, different styles

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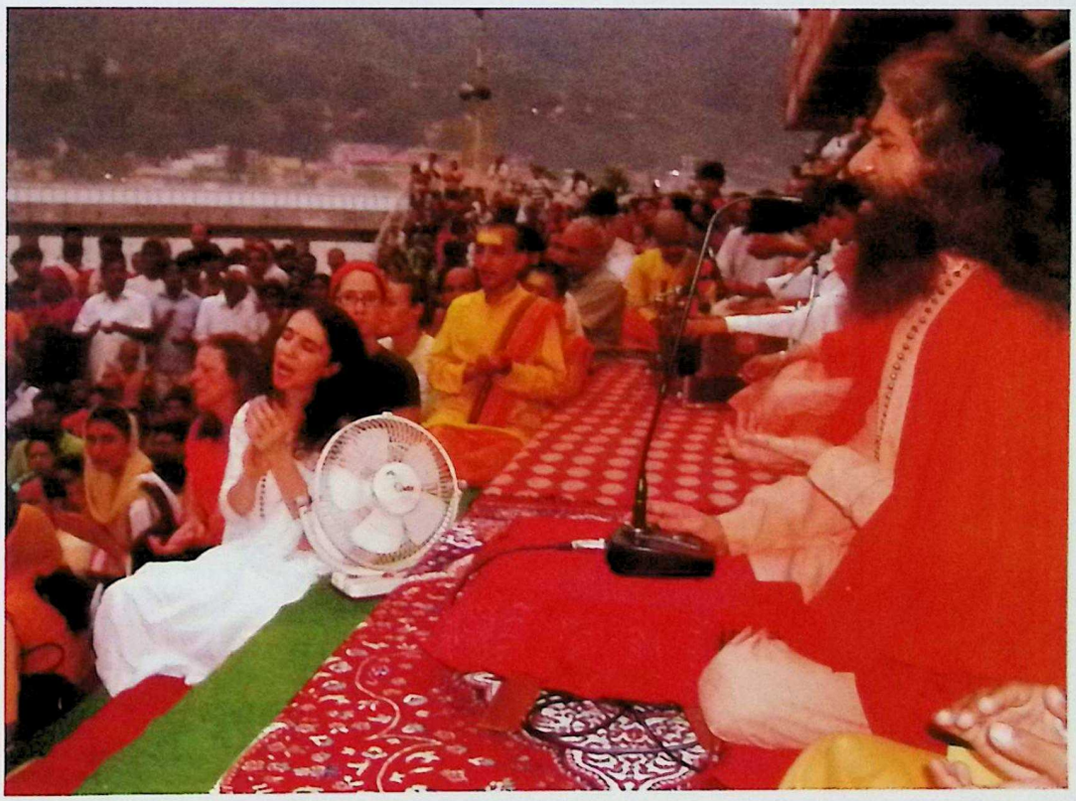

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Spiritual Tourism: A Place to Rejuvenate

Trying to cash in on its age-old status of Devbhoomi, or the land of Gods, various tour operators, recreation and spiritual centres in Uttarakhand have promoted the region through spiritual tourism packages. Located in the tranquil Himalayan foothills, close to the mythological cities of Haridwar and Rishikesh, surrounded by graceful Sal forests, overlooking the peaceful Ganga as it meanders into the distance, Ananda is the spiritual pathway to the ultimate, discovered through the union of body, mind and soul. It is not just a retreat that will leave you breathless with the enchantment of its surroundings, but also assists in redefining lifestyles to include the well-known traditional Indian wellness regimes of Ayurveda, Yoga and Vedanta combined with best of International Wellness Experiences to bring about the union of mind, body and soul. Once the residence of Maharaja of Tehri-Garhwal, it is now dedicated to today's traveler, who is looking for innovative ways to restore and rejuvenate his energies.

A visitor can experience the magic of the Himalayan landscape and forest; the salubrious climate throughout the year; the luxury spa oriented towards the personal goals of each visitor. The holy river Ganges and the old Vice Regal Palace exudes the charm of a bygone royal era; besides the mystical Hill Theatre for cultural evenings.

Seat of Brahm Vidya

Rishikesh is honored to have the 120-year old Kailash Ashram Brahmavidyapeetham, an institution dedicated to preserve and promote the traditional Vedantic Studies. Prominent personalities such as Swami Vivekananda, Swami Rama Tirtha and Swami Shivananda have studied in this institution.

Vashishtha Gufa about 10 miles from Rishikesh is a cave where the great Hindu sage perfeormed his sadhna ages ago. One still gets the holy vibration when meditating in the cave.

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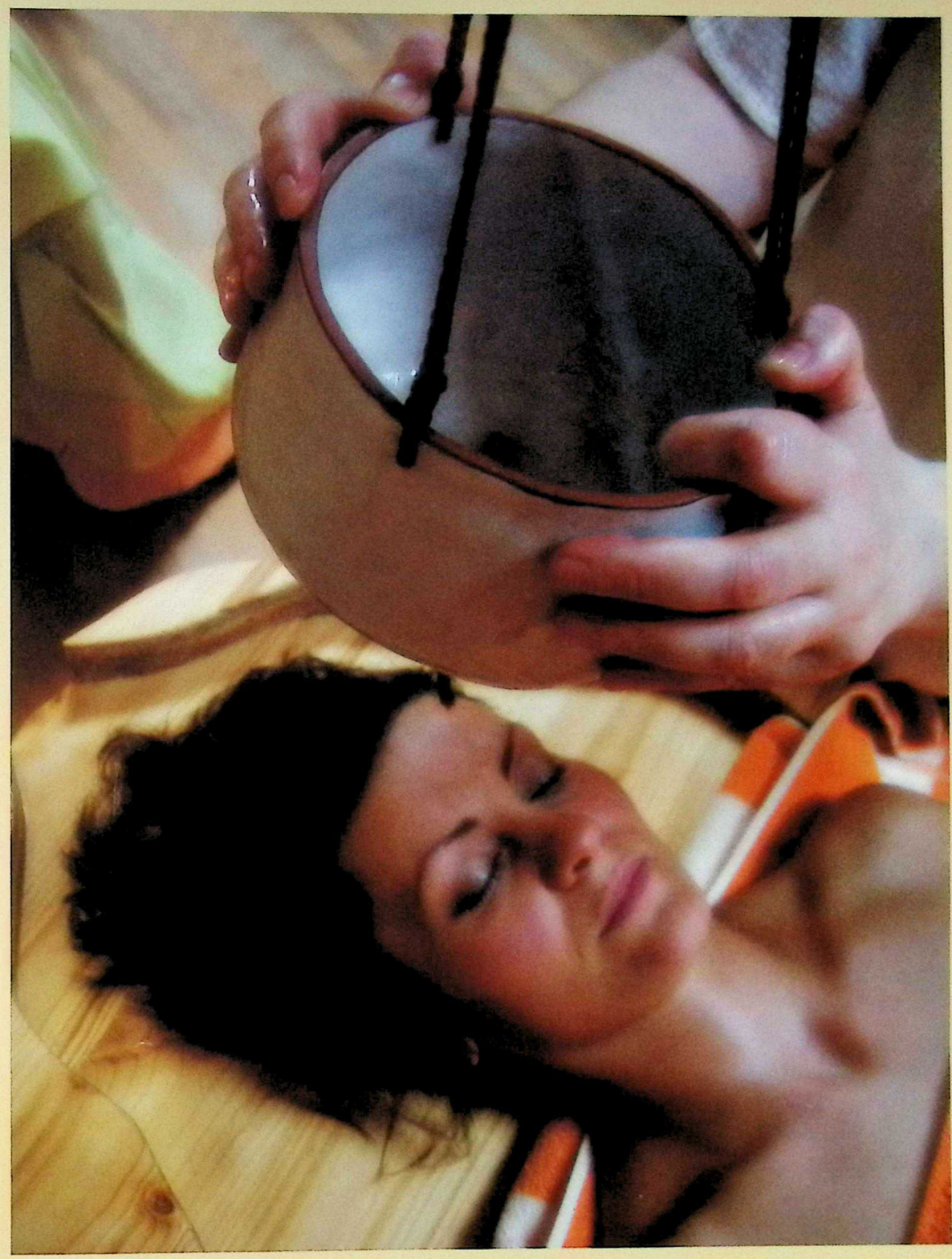

Shirodhara, a Panchkarma Ayurvedic healing technique.

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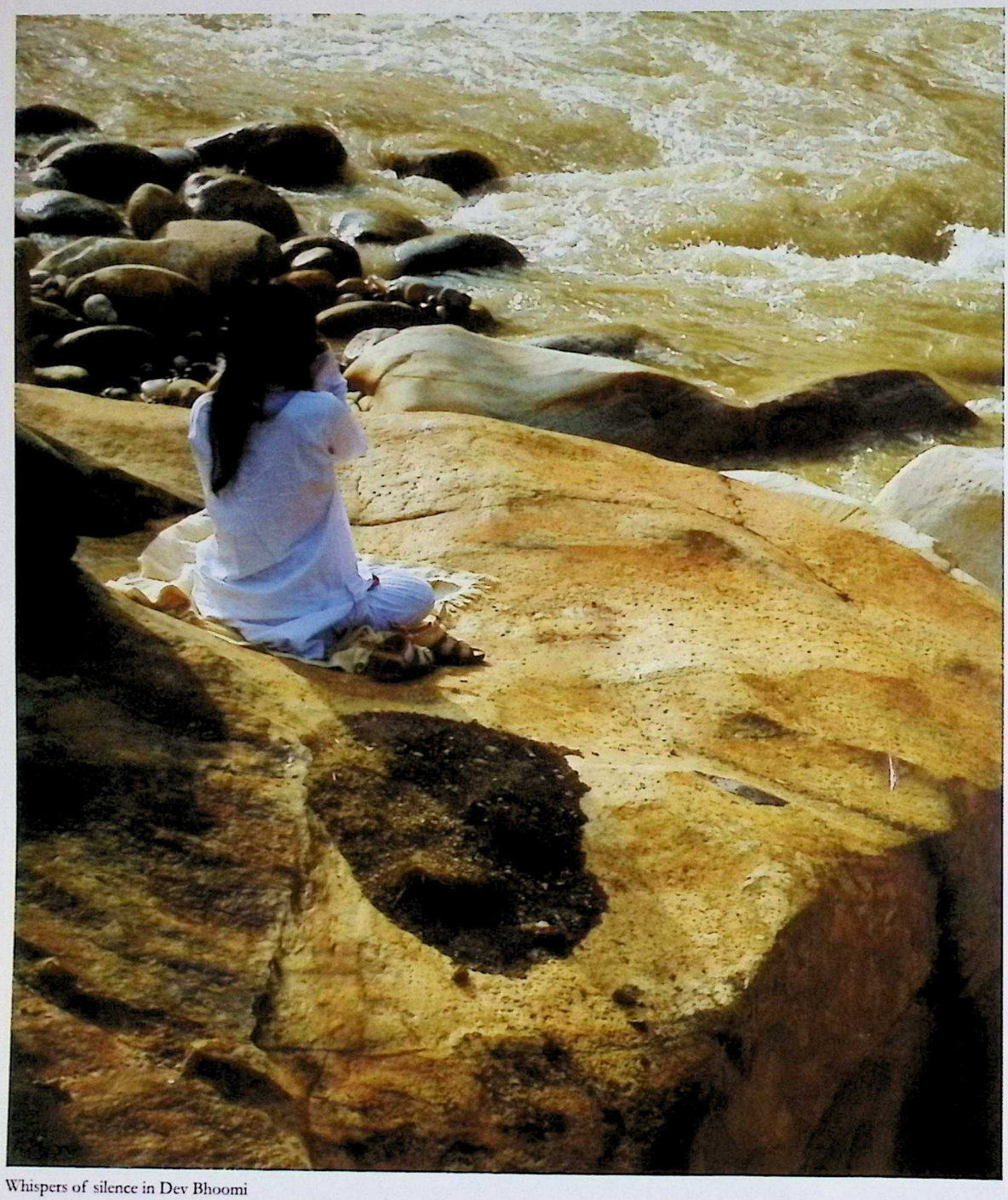

Whispers of silence in Dev Bhoomi

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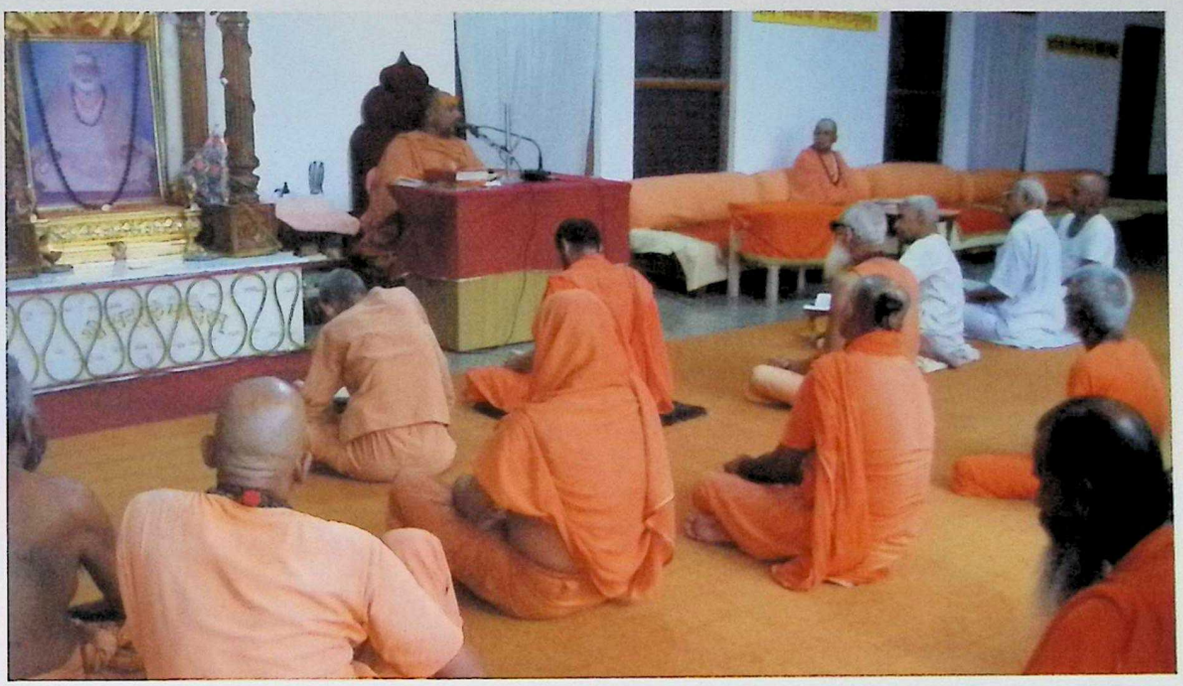

Top: Old guru Shishya Tradition of teaching being followed in Sadhna Sadan of Kankhal.
Above: Vice Chancellor of Dev Sanskrit Viswavidyalaya teaching foreign delegates during orientation workshop in Kumbh mela.

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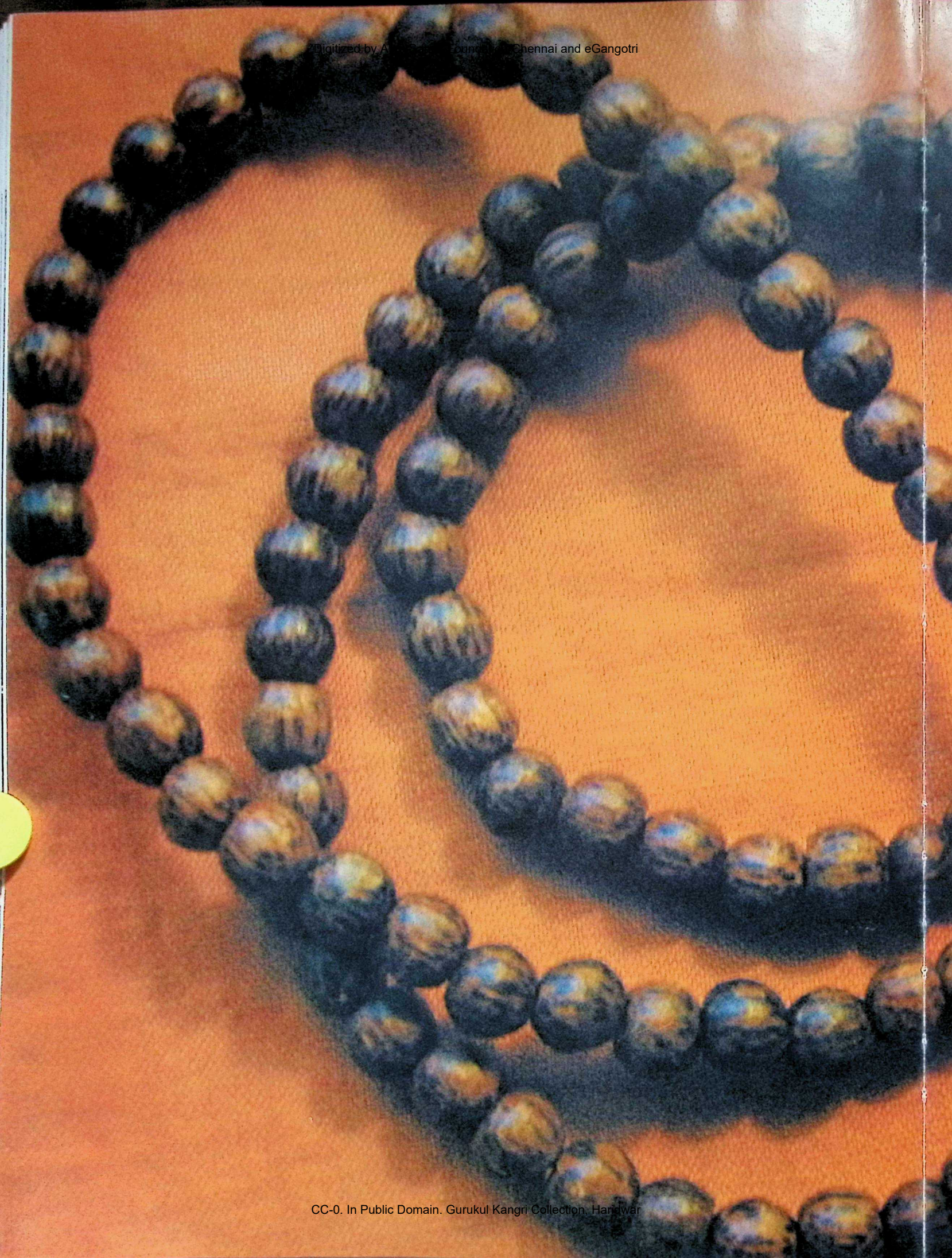

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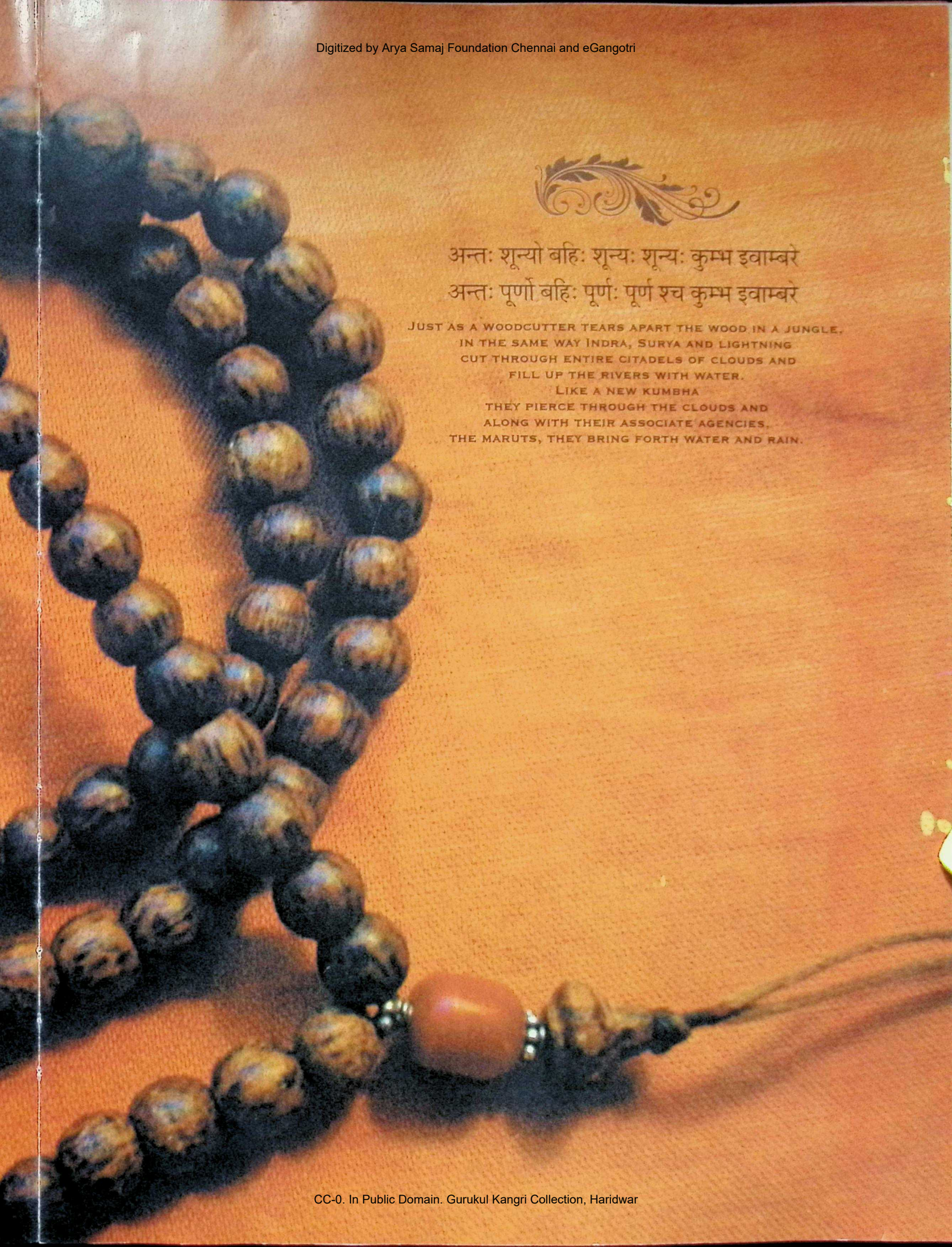

अन्तः शून्यो बहिः शून्यः शून्यः कुम्भ इवाम्बरे
अन्तः पूर्णो बहिः पूर्णः पूर्ण श्च कुम्भ इवाम्बरे

JUST AS A WOODCUTTER TEARS APART THE WOOD IN A JUNGLE,
IN THE SAME WAY INDRA, SURYA AND LIGHTNING
CUT THROUGH ENTIRE CITADELS OF CLOUDS AND
FILL UP THE RIVERS WITH WATER.
LIKE A NEW KUMBHA
THEY PIERCE THROUGH THE CLOUDS AND
ALONG WITH THEIR ASSOCIATE AGENCIES,
THE MARUTS, THEY BRING FORTH WATER AND RAIN.

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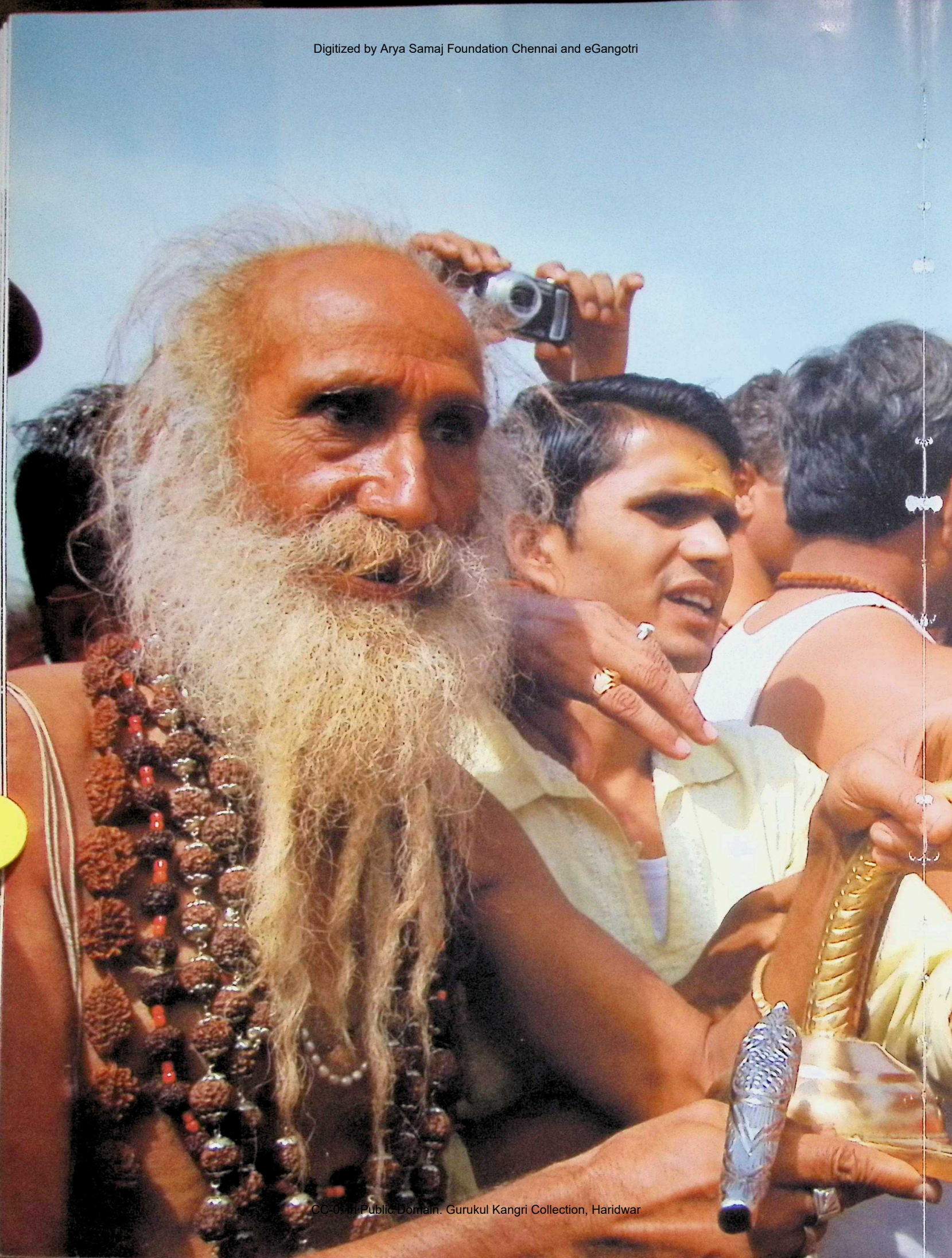

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SAINTS OF INDIA

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Who are Sadhus?

The Sadhu is a Hindu ascetic who has relinquished caste, social position, wealth, and authority for a special cause. Also referred to as a Yogi or Sanyasi, a Sadhu occupies a distinctive place in Hindu society. Sadhus' aim towards seeking the Universal Soul so as to be immersed in it. A Sadhu does not have any caste and can easily ascribe himself to any division of social structure.

Sadhus are also perceived by the Indian society as spiritual adventurers, austere warriors, pious spiritualists, occult mutineers or metaphysical monks. Hindus consider them as the representative of gods and worship them.)

Sadhus often wear ochre-colored clothing, symbolizing renunciation. These undana-would renouncers have chosen to live a life different from or on the edges of society in order to focus on their own spiritual practice, as well as impartially form an order for working for the upliftment of the righteous conduct in society.

A 'Rishi'(sage) is a combination of vaibhav (abundance) and vairagya (detachment). Indian saints followed the tradition of 'Rajrishis', 'Brahmarishis' and 'Maharshis'. It is absurd that mostly the image of an Indian sadhu or mendicant has been portrayed in the west as a person begging alms to feed his stomach, whereas Indian rishis have enjoyed the status of rajrishis or royal ascetics, Brahmarishi (Tatpurusha, knower of Brahm jnana or esoteric knowledge) and Maharshi (a grand teacher of mysticism).

Royalty of a sage is just to exhibit the same state of abundance of Indian mendicants. How can one renunciate without achieving anything in life.

'Vaibhav se hi toh vairagya mein jaya ja sakta hai.' (Moving from abundance to detachment or renunciation is alone possible).-- These were the words from a Sadhu baba who felt that he could concentrate on the Supreme, the five elements of nature sitting on his seat with as much ease as to burn a votary in a shamshan ghat(cremation ground) or perform a difficult operation in a hospital.

Sadhu's rituals

Prosperity comes with cleanliness; the cleanliness in surroundings and purity in thoughts. With filth all around, how can one expect royalty to usher in one's life or community? The growing plastic menace in the holy city and Ganga river is symbolic of the poverty. To enjoy life fully, one must take up service to humanity. Performing surgeries on brain malignancies alone in Netherlands (work place of Soham baba) did not give me satisfaction, so I started working towards a mission serving people across 128 nations.

To live for others has been my mission. Indian sages of ancient times were very wise. They introduced valuable traditions in Hindu community such the prefixing the titles of Shri and Shrimati to the name of every man and woman respectively. This denotes affluence being attached to every individual, without denial.

Leading holistic life of fulfillment is the best way to spend life meaningfully and in service of humanity. To lead a fulfilling life, one must practice complete transparency in words and deeds. He must give due importance to the 'vaibhav' and 'vairagya'. Money must not rule the mind at any given moment of life. In fact, it should be the other way round and we must become rulers of money.

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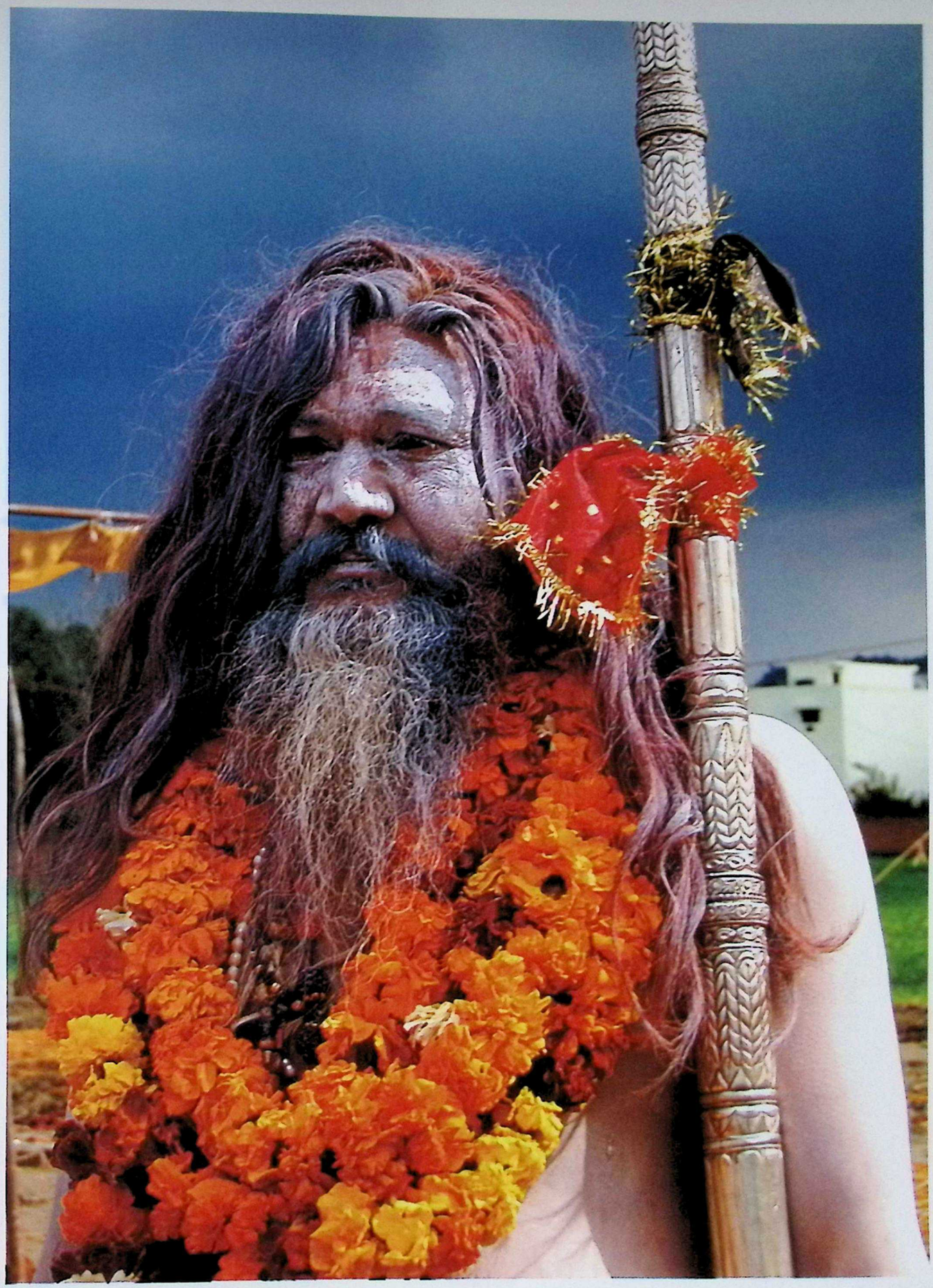

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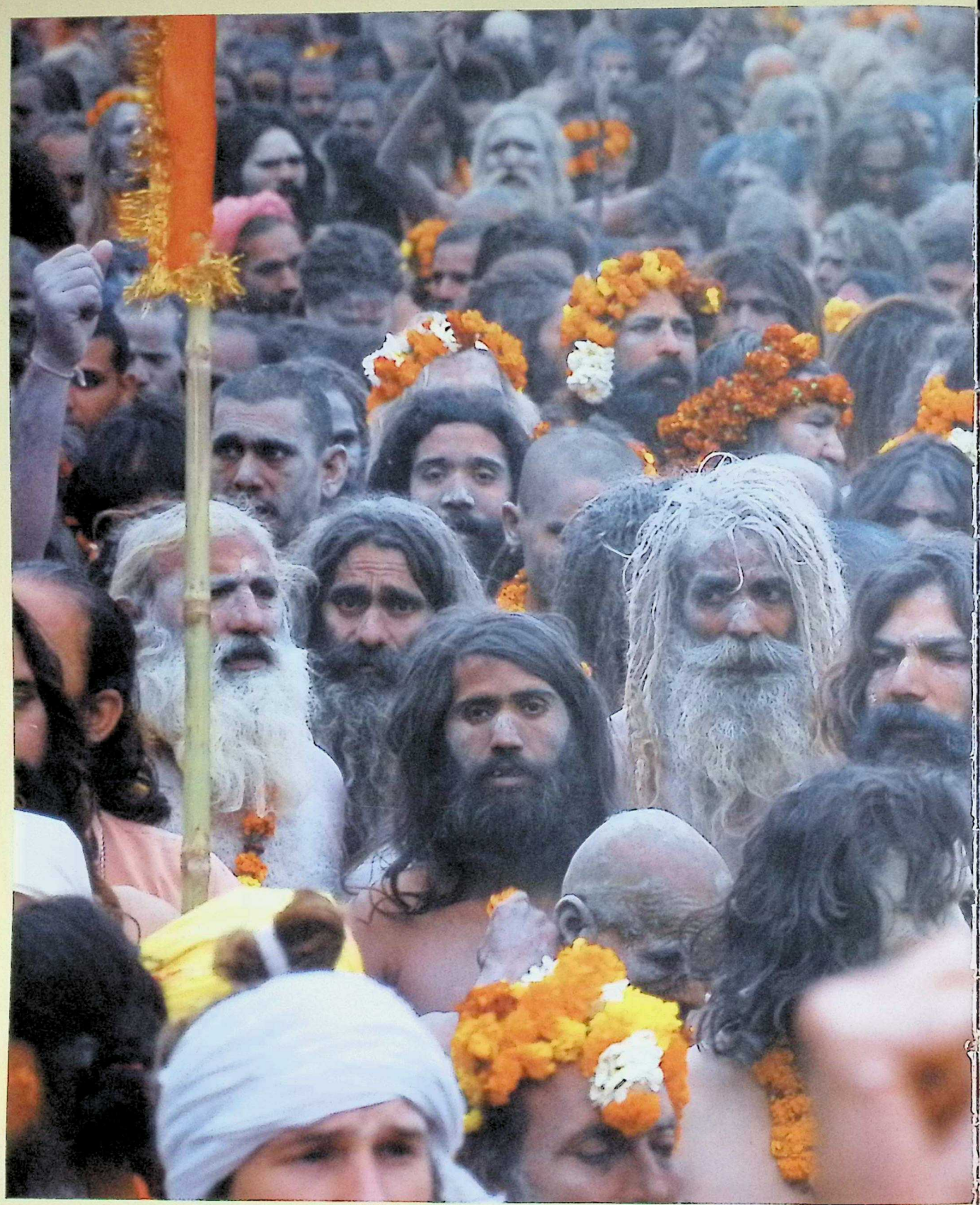

Another massive procession of sadhus on march to take a holy dip.

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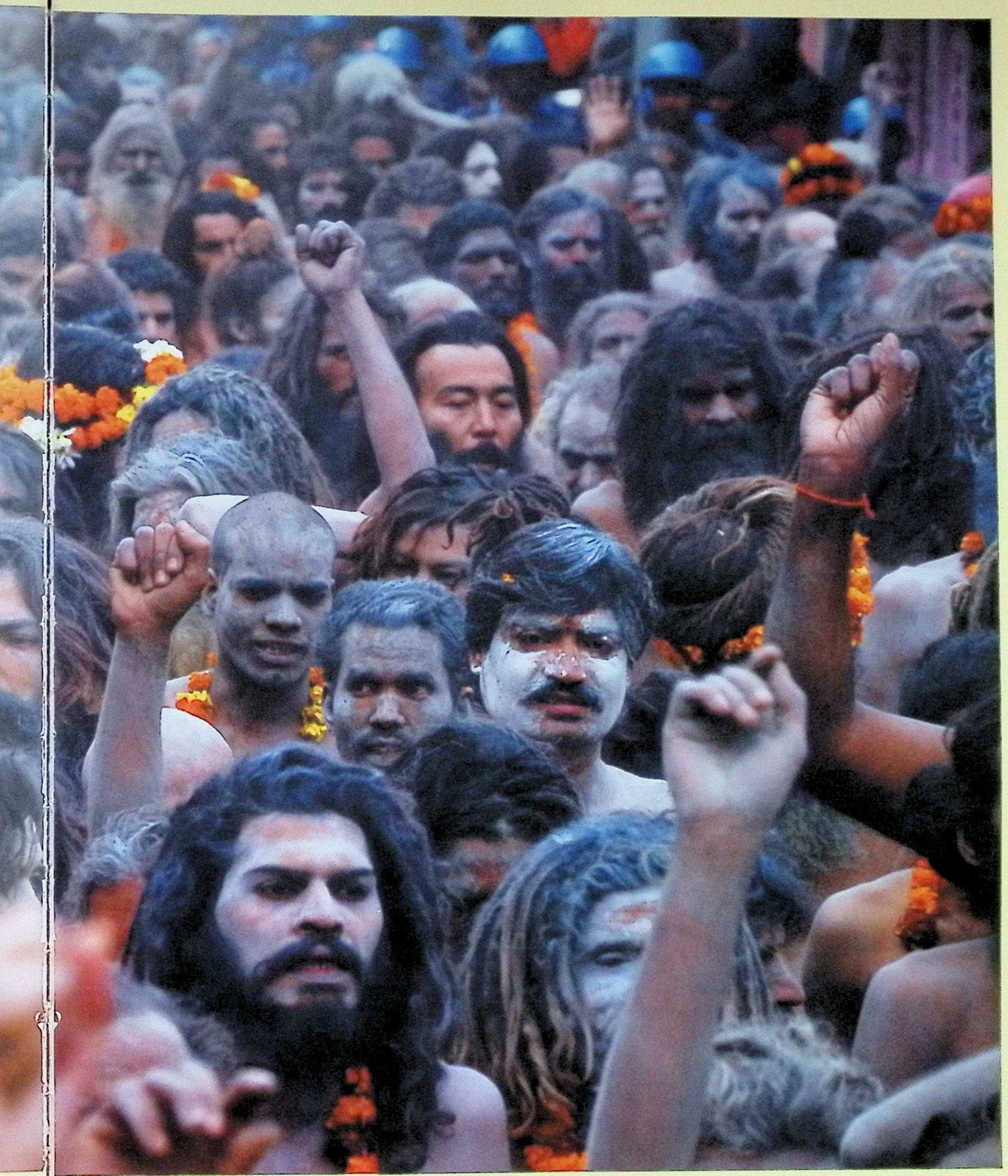

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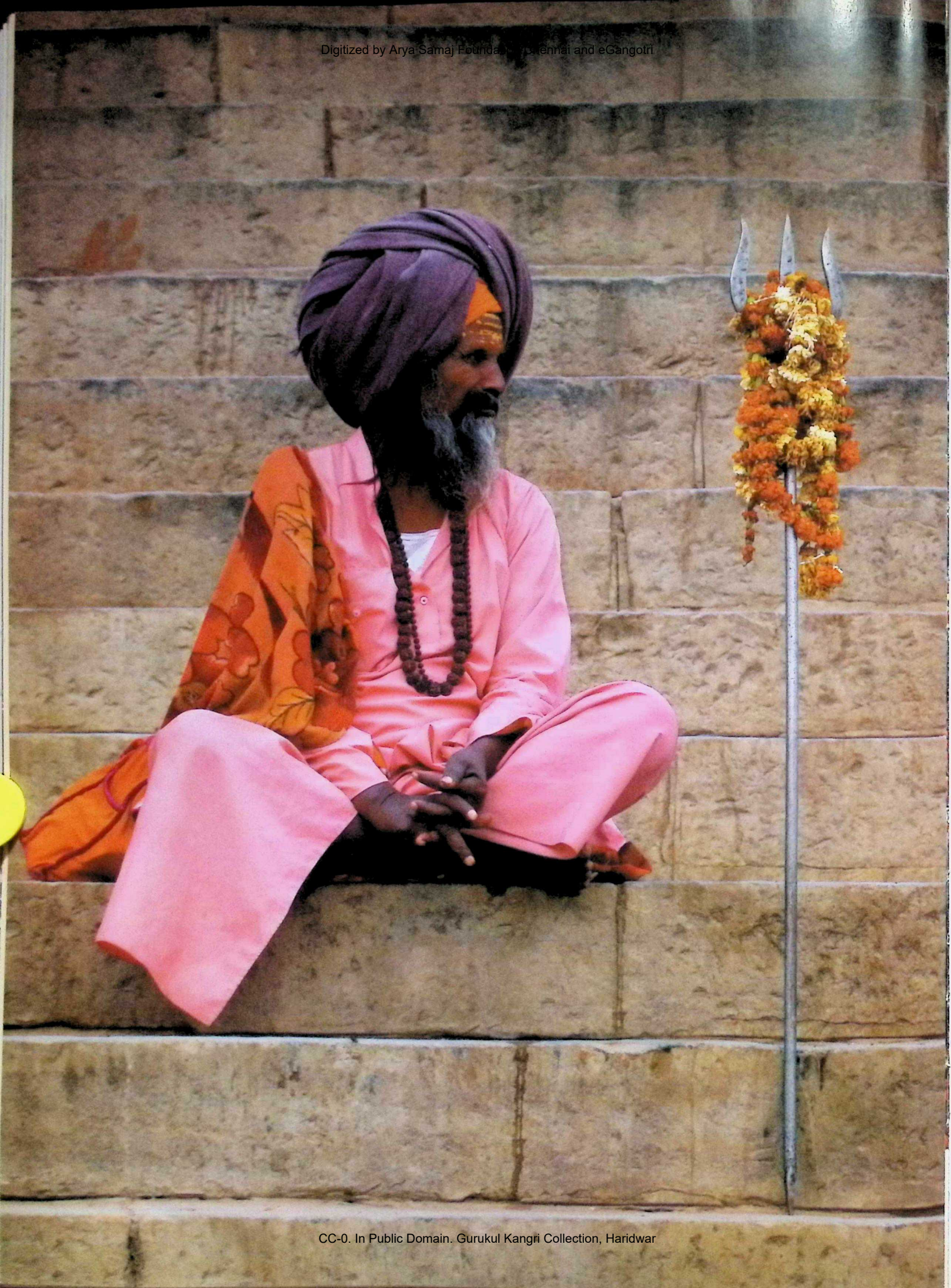

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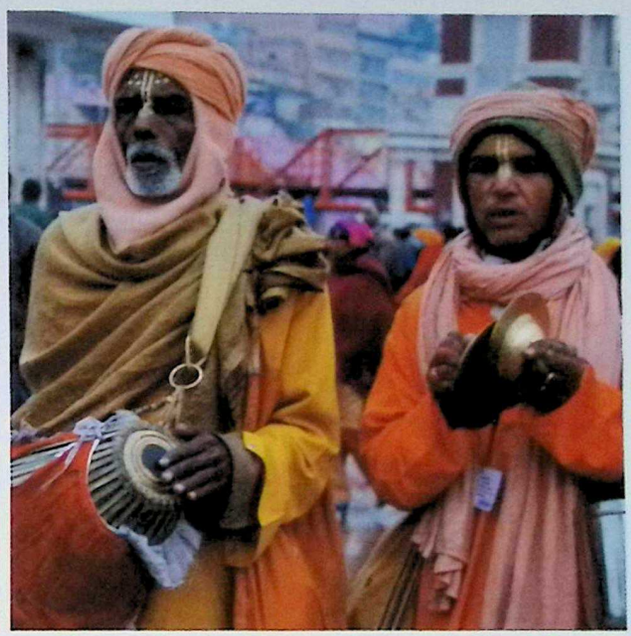

Left: Even Such 'independent' sadhus get attention during the kumbh-melas
Above: Various monks and their display of faith

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Akharas

The term 'Akhara' represents a social and spatial organization of any specialized group. In its monastic sense the term is often used to define a sub grouping of the sadhu's and sanyasi's ascetic order. Akhara literally means 'wrestling arena'. It is an organization of different sects of sadhus or Hindu Renunciates. Its history dates back to 2500 BC when Adi Shankaracharya established Dasnaami akharas; including Mahanirvani, Niranjani, Juna, Atal, Avahan, Agni and Anand Akhara. Today the Akharas are categorized into 3 major and 3 minor groups.

Major Akharas

Mahanirvani, Niranjani, Juna

Minor Akharas

Atal affiliated with Mahanirvani, Anand affiliated with Niranjani, Avahan affiliated with Juna.

Furthermore, a small Brahmachari Akhara also exists named 'Agni'. This Akhara is affiliated to Juna. There also numerous minor Akhara's usually set up by disciples as an affiliate to a major Akhara.

Division of Akharas

Akharas are categorized into different groups according to the concept of God they worship. Shaiva Akharas are reserved for followers of Lord Shiva, Vaishnava or Vairagi Akhara for followers of Lord Vishnu and Kalpwasis for the followers of Lord Brahma.

An Akhara is divided into 8 davas (divisions) and 52 marhis (centres). Each Marhi is governed by a Mahant. The top administrative body of the Akhara is Shree Panch (the body of five), representing Brahma, Vishnu, Shiv, Shakti and Ganesha. It is elected on every Kumbh mela and the body holds designated post for 4 years.

The biggest Akhara - based on the number of sadhus it has - is Juna. Niranjani Akhara is ranked as second and the third is Mahanirvani Akhara. The first person in the Akhara is the Acharya Mahamandaleshwar, followed by Mandaleshwaras and Shree Mahants. Regardless of their rank, all Acharyas can be considered Gurudevs in their own right.

Traditionally, during the Kumbh mela, the Naga Sadhus of the 'Akharas', lead and initiate the bathing rituals, before the common public joins in.

The Martial Akhara

Unlike the stereotypical image of the passive, mystical sannyasi, the Dasnami Nagas were and to some extent still are known for their military exploits. Their akharas became centers for training in martial arts and armaments. G. S. Ghurye, the eminent Indian professor of sociology has translated the term 'akhara' as 'military regiment', for the reason that Dasnami Nagas were involved in various military campaigns held at different times.

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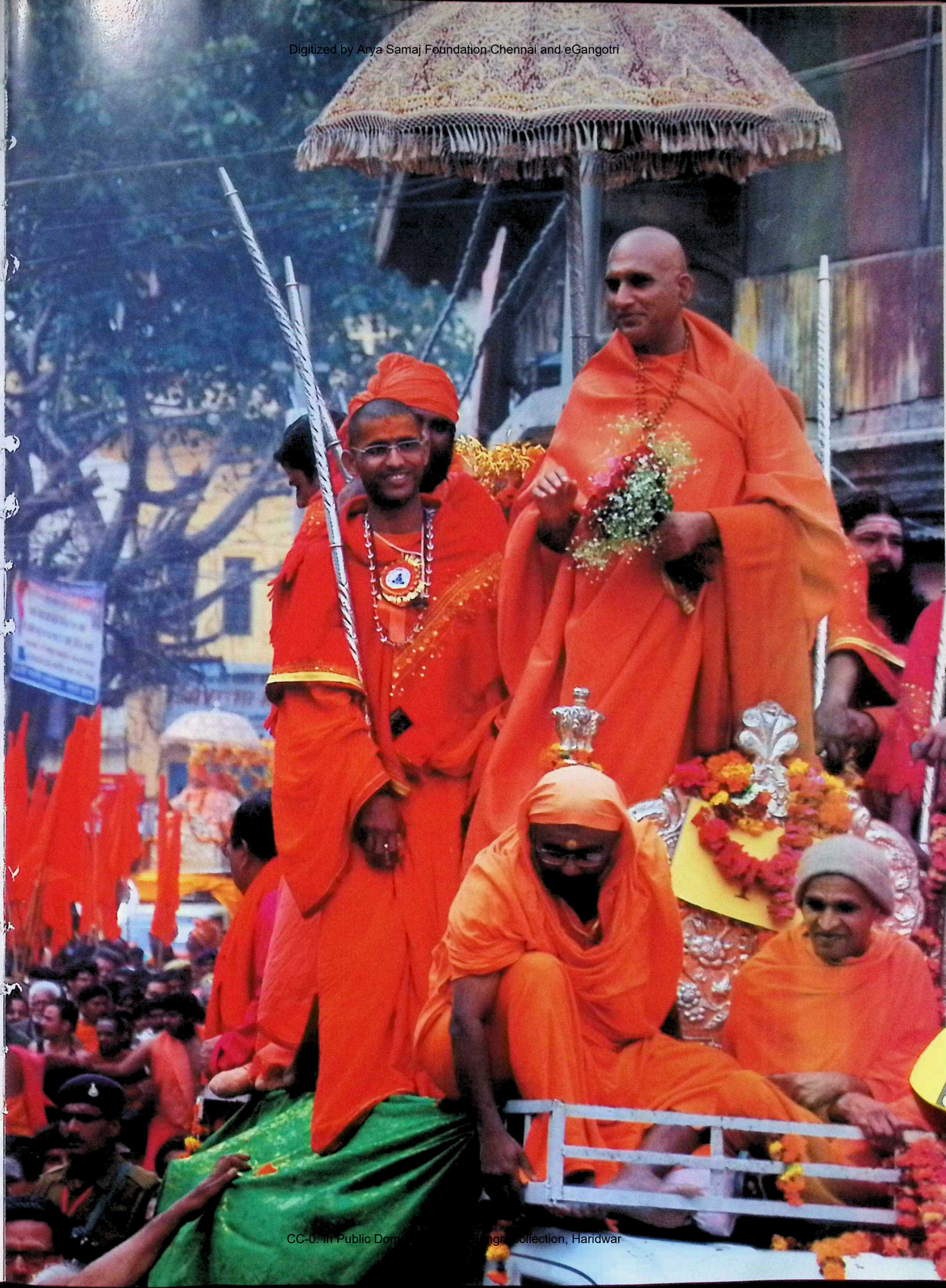

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Previous Page: Akhara procession with head priest of every sect presenting their streagth, following and popularity in full grandeur
Above: Agni Akhara sadhus, saints and followers going to take a ceremonial bath

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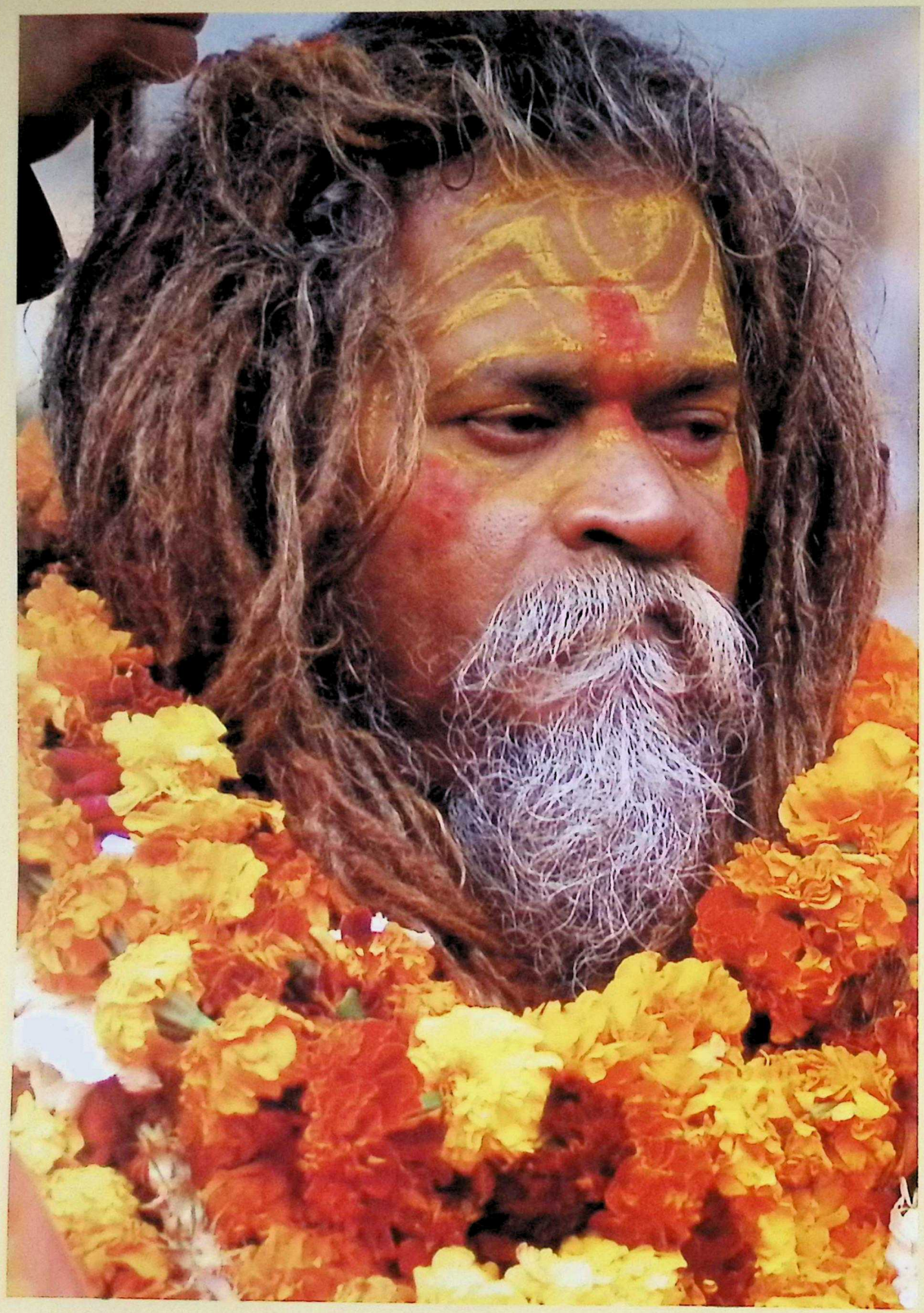

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Kaleidoscope of Kumbh mela Peshwais (Processions)
Next Page: Investiture of 'Dharam dhvaiya' at Akhara camp ceremony

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Akharas of Sannyasis

Shri Taponidhi Niranjani Akhara Panchayati
Shri Panchayati Anand Akhara
Shri Panchadashnam Juna Akhara
Shri Panch Avahan Akhara
Shri Agni Akhara
Shri Panchayati Akhara Mahanirvani
Shri Panchayati Atal Akhara

Akharas of Bairagis (Vaishnavas)

Shri Nirvani Akhara
Shri Digambar Akhara
Shri Nirmohi Akhara
Shri Santoshi Akhara
Shri Khaki Akhara
Shri Mahanirvani Akhara
Shri Niralambi Akhara

Akharas of Udasins

Shri Panchayati Akhara Bara Udasin
Shri Udasin Panchayati Naya Akhara

Akharas of Nirmals

Shri Nirmal Panchayati Akhara

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Previous Page: A panoramic view of 'Agni Akhara' Procession showing participating sadhus and their followers in different attires
Above & Right: Various displays and exhibits during the religious processions

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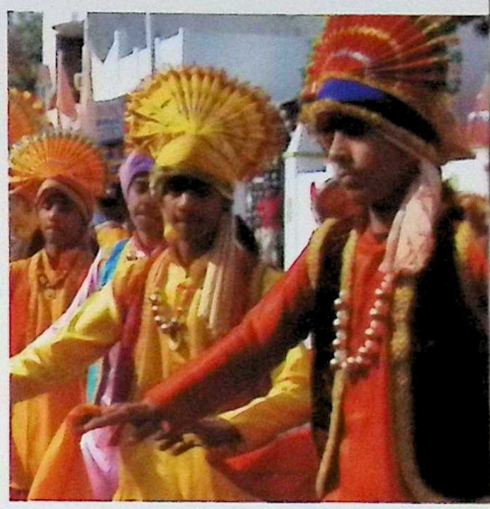

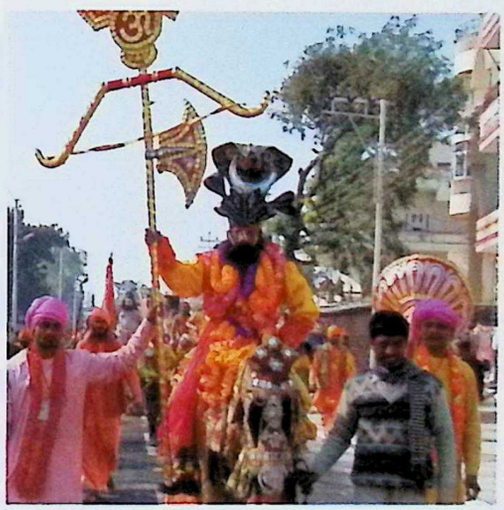

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A Glance at the History of Akharas

Taking a glance at the history, establishment of 'Shaiv' tradition of akharas took place during the Mughal period for the propagation of Hindu religion and to safeguard it. The sannyasi warriors of these akharas fought with the Mughal armies on behalf of the rulers. After emerging as triumphants, the kings used to donate their kingdoms and wealth to these renunciant warriors. This money became the source of livelihood for akhara members.

These akharas comprise of two types of sannyasis; the warriors and preachers. Both donate their services towards religious cause. But entry to these akharas has been kept under strict discipline to maintain the religious nature of these institutions. Stringent rules and code of conduct have helped these akharas prevail with dignity even in the present time.

After being introduced into the traditions of akhara for many years, one gets official entry into the akhara. Mahant Rajendra Das explicates the need of an individual to be well versed with traditions and karma kandas (rituals) to be part of akhara.

Entrance Test for Akharas Tough to Crack

It might appear easier to become a renunciant, resisting the temptations of the materialistic world. However, entry into akharas is not a cakewalk by any means. It is like undergoing a fulltime course, appearing in an exam and proving one's guts, perseverance and devotion under strict discipline.

The traditions followed by various Sannyasi, Udasin, Vaishnav and Nirmal akharas may be different but entry to these is almost the same — walking on the razor edge. The difference is only in the traditions adopted and activities indulged in.

The disciplines for entry to akhara:

Attend to all services of the respective akhara.
Post initiation from the akhara leader.
Engage in religious preaching.

Once a candidate successfully passes the test modeled by the leader, entry to akhara is confirmed. The following procedures take place:
Vijayhoma (sacrificial fire) is lit the whole night.
Renunciation of each belonging including clothing under dharma dhvaja follows.
The candidate is bestowed with the title of Naga sannyasi.
For three years after initiation, the stamping of akhara must be carried forward to become a leader.

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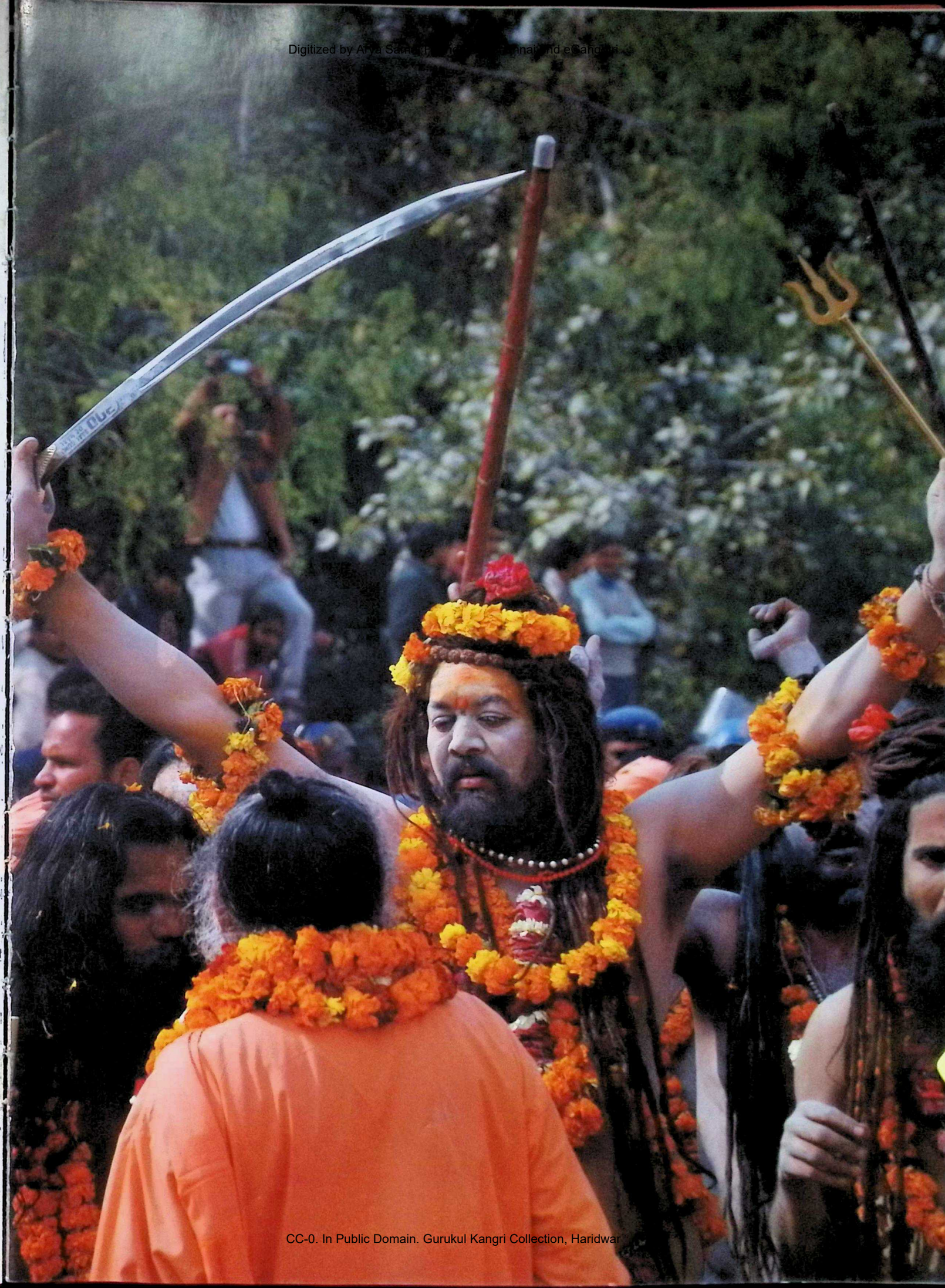

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Previous Page: A Well built sadhu displaying his marshal art skills
Above & Right: Naga Sadhus with floral wreaths around their heads and necks raising slogans of glory of Lord Shiva during procession
Next Page: Rudraksha rosaries are horn for spiritual enlightenment and peace of mind

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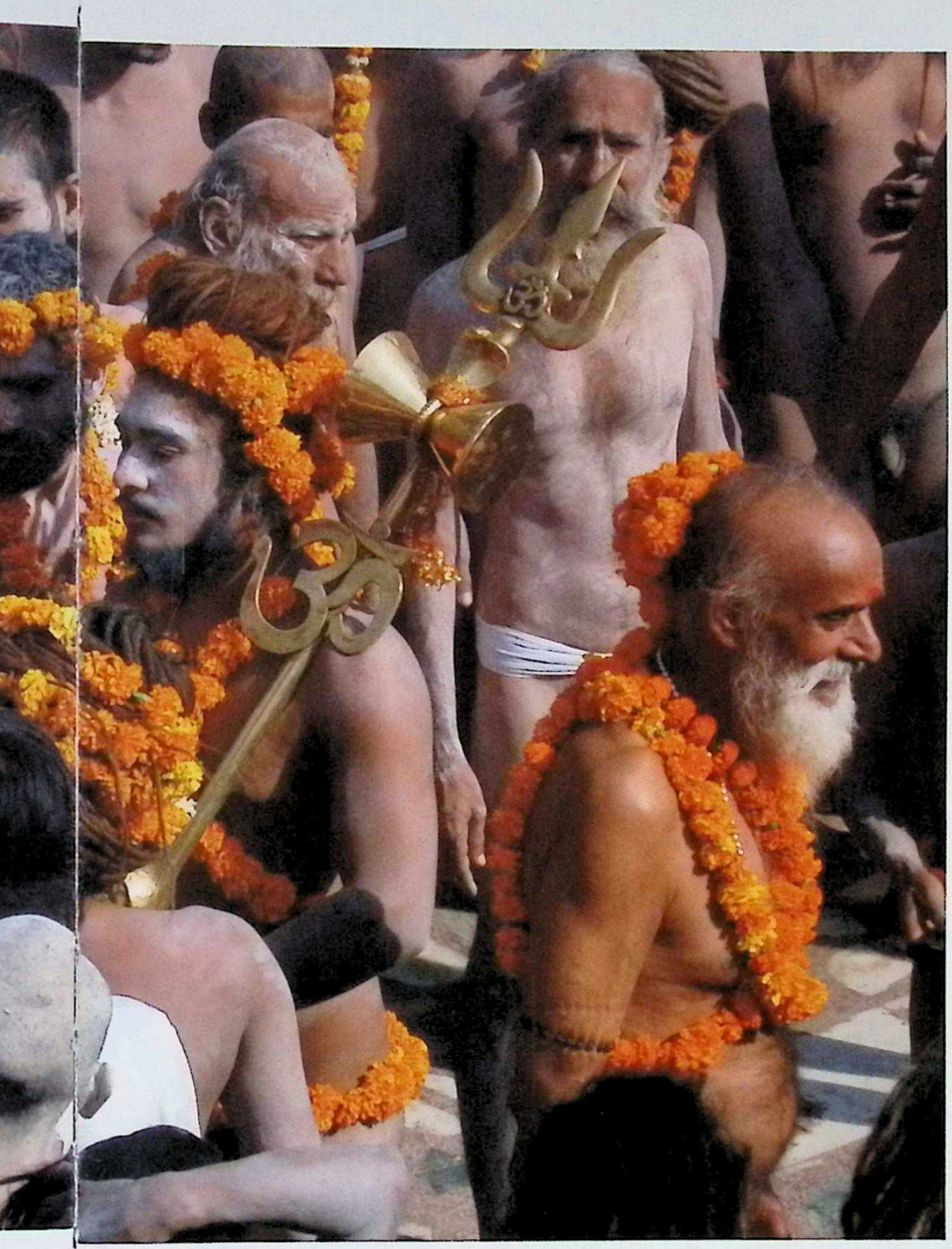

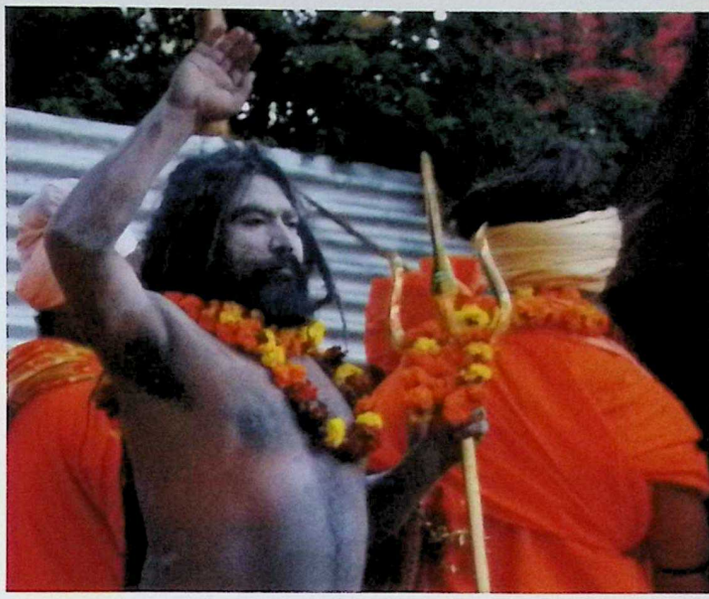

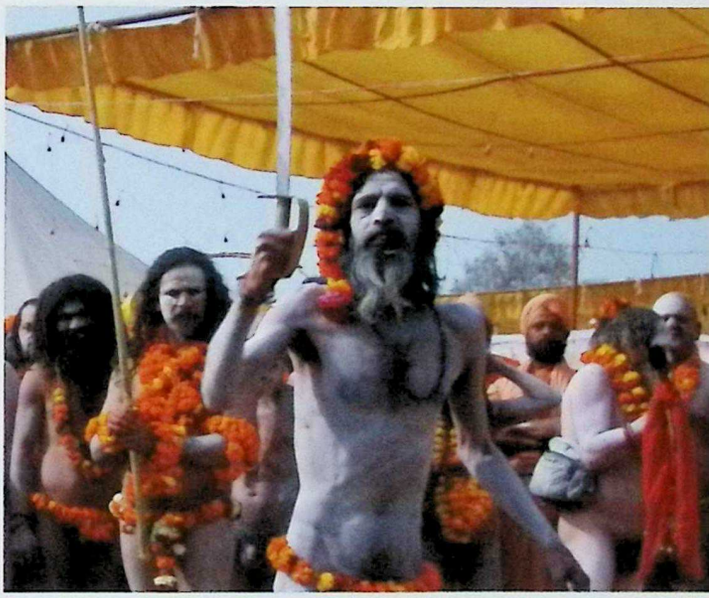

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Who are Nagas?

The Naga or Naga Sadhus, as they are commonly referred to, are the epitome of renunciation. With matted hair, naked ash-smeared body, they represent human being in its purest state. They are also representatives of Lord Shiva. Basically a part of a cryptic and surreptitious society, they mainly appear in public during the Kumbh Mela. Due to their close association with war and ammunitions for religious cause, Naga Sadhus are also termed as warrior ascetics. .

In addition to the Akharas, there is the Nath Sampradaya. Matsyendranath Nath asserts that they have a tradition much older than the ten names (Dasnami). Their ancestor was swallowed by a fish hence the name.

Other sects of Nath Sampradaya claim Dattatreya, an avatar of Shiva, as the founder. Their purpose is to enjoy peace, freedom and happiness in this life and not to be reborn. All these institutions evolved into sub- and sub-sub orders. Disciples practice, transform their guru's teachings and pass it on in turn.

Adornments

Kali-Durga worshipers and Ramayanandrins wear black tilak. Disciples of Hanuman ji adorn their foreheads with orange tilak. Digambaras and Naga Babas go naked or cover their body with ashes. Nirvanis tie their bun on the right, Niranjani in the middle, Juna on the left. They practice the Dhooni (holy hearth). Some of the sadhus carry a sword, a spear, a trishul or a staff as weapon or symbol of their akhara/sect.

Saviours of Religion

History records many bloody battles in Kumbh document when Naga armies fought to save the people from tyrant rulers and establish peace.

Many bloody battles have been recorded in the dossier of Haridwar Kumbh mela. Tyrannies were reported by Muslim rulers who looted the saints and sages during Kumbh fairs and festivals. Even enmity amongst the different sects of sadhus and akharas resulted in bloodshed and wars. The fights amongst different sadhus and sannyasis gave birth to a number of new customs and traditions during grand fairs. Interestingly, some of them are still prevalent today.

In the Kumbh mela of 1398, Taimur Lung came to Haridwar and looted the pilgrims of the holy city. Disjunction of temples and breaking of idols have been recorded in the history. A huge temple of Lord Shiva (Gangadhar Mahadev Mandir) at 'Har Ki Pauri' was broken and Hindu saints were imprisoned by his forces. These captive sadhus were freed by King Maldev after a long and fierce battle at Nagarkot near the state of Kashmir. Soon after this battle, the holy pundits of Haridwar were freed and made to go through yajnapweet sanskar (sacred thread ceremony) before sending them back to their respective families.

In the Kumbh mela of 1666, the tyrant army of Aurangzeb attacked the holy city. Naga sanyasis fought the battle along with Maratha army thus bringing defeat to the Mughal army. Kumbh mela had witnessed many pilgrims from outside the city who had come on bullock carts.

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Previous Page: Nagas in their full attire during shani Snan (Royal Bath) procession
Above: Nagas wear no clothing and are believed to be masters of starline powers

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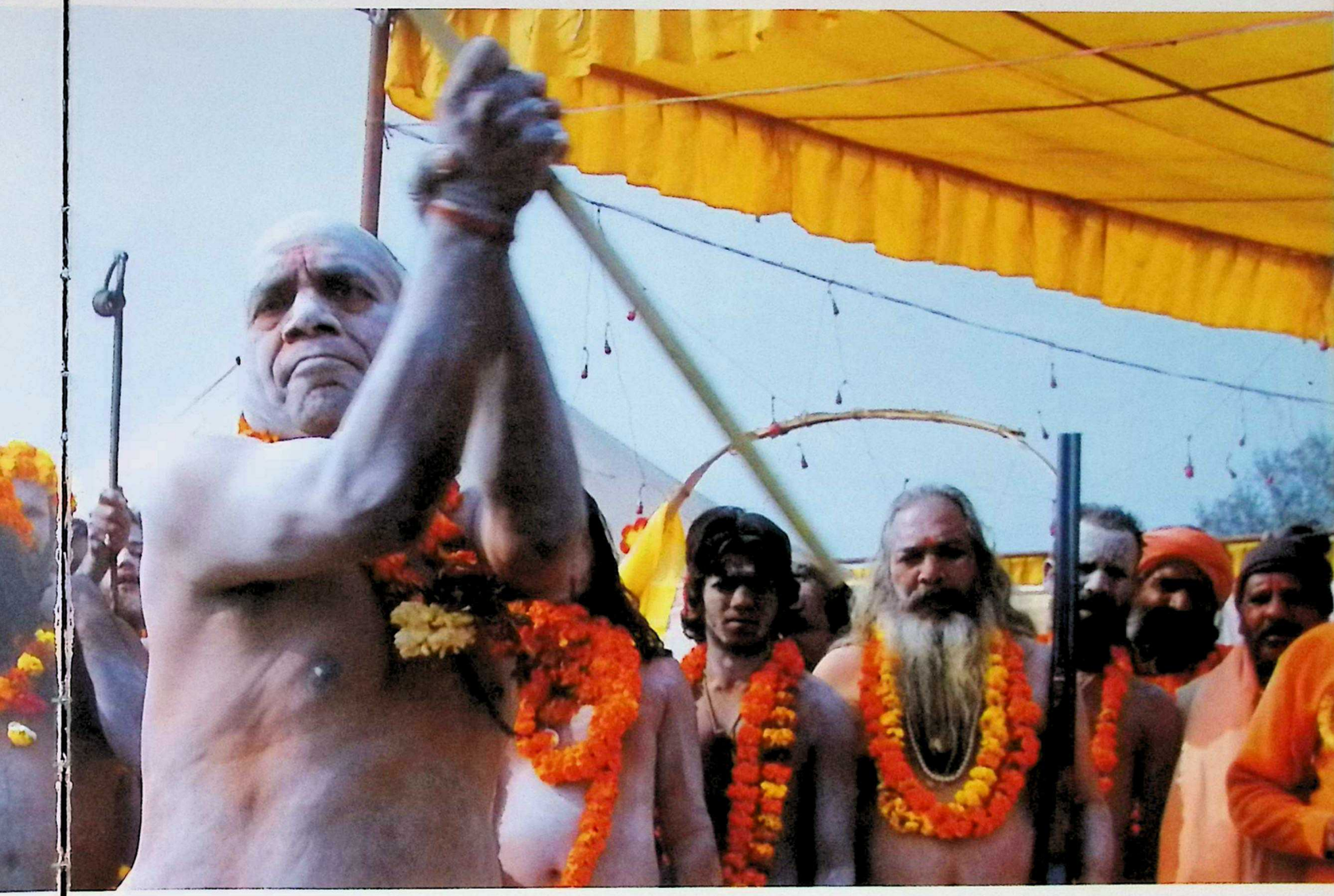

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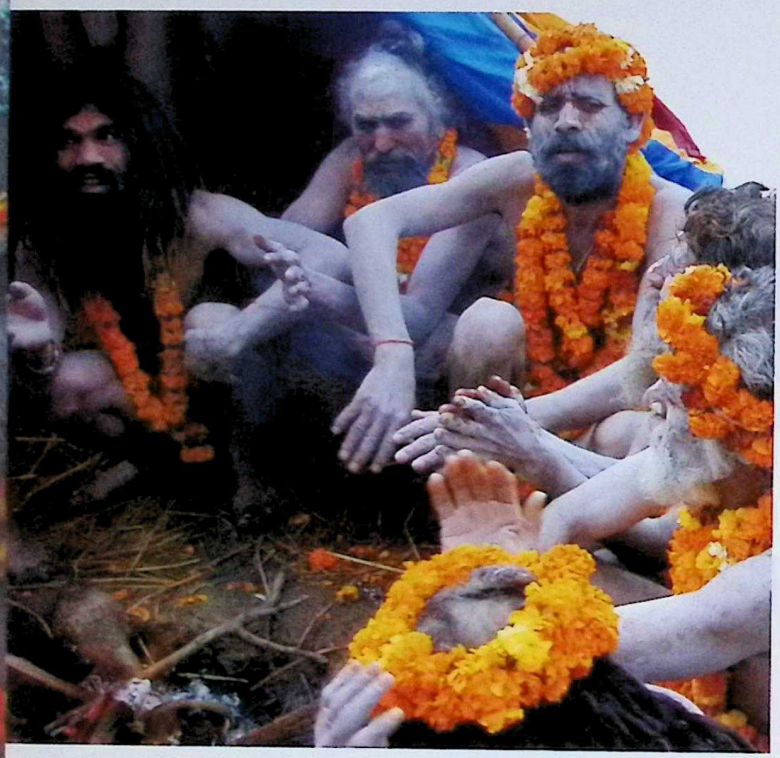

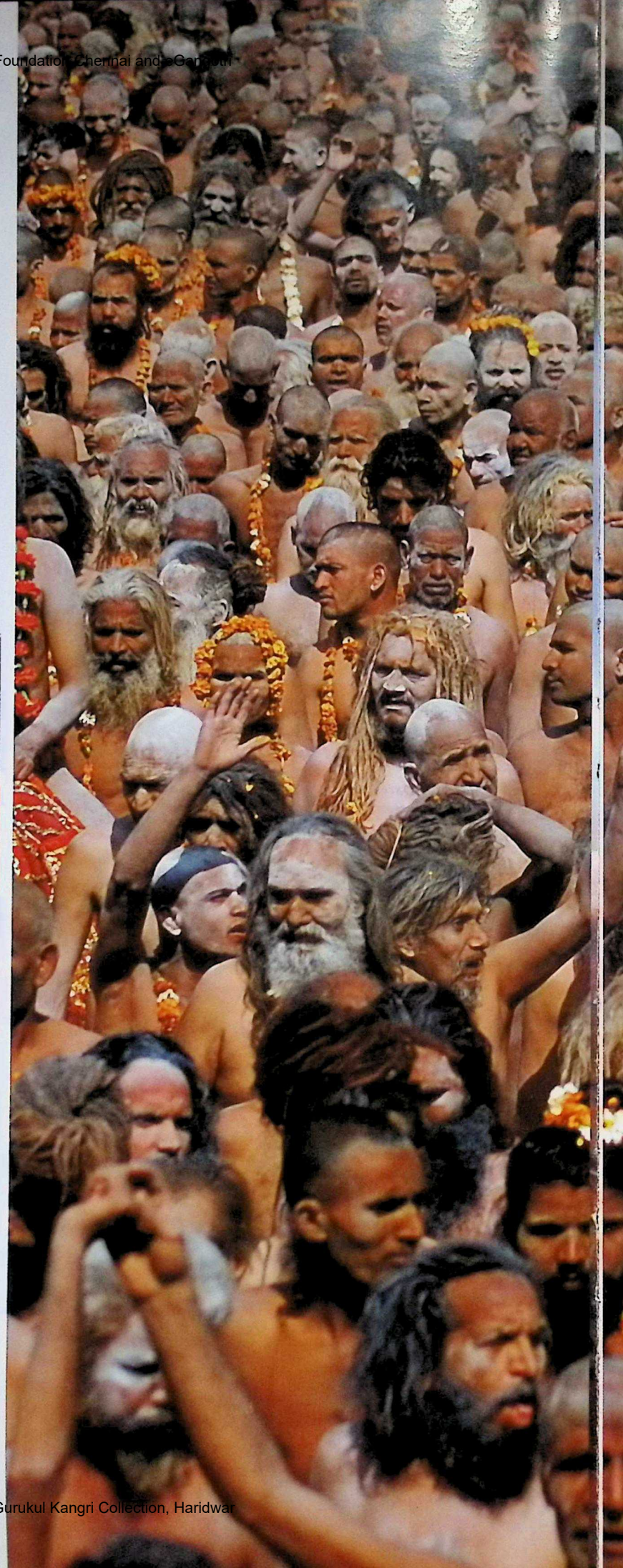

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Celebrating Maha Parv Naga Sadhus

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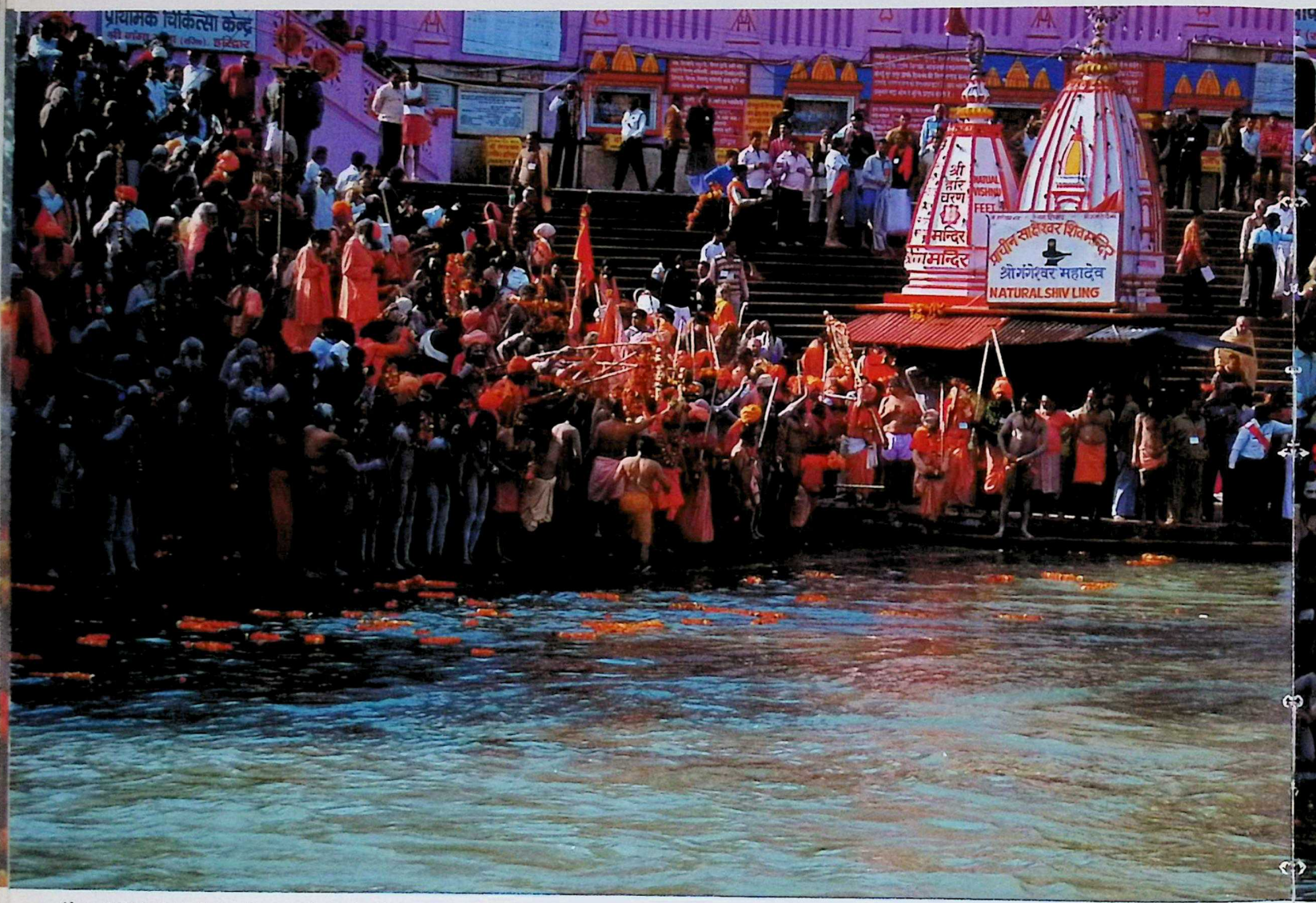

Above & Right: Naga Sadhus line up at Brahmkund, sanctum sanctoum for royal bath.

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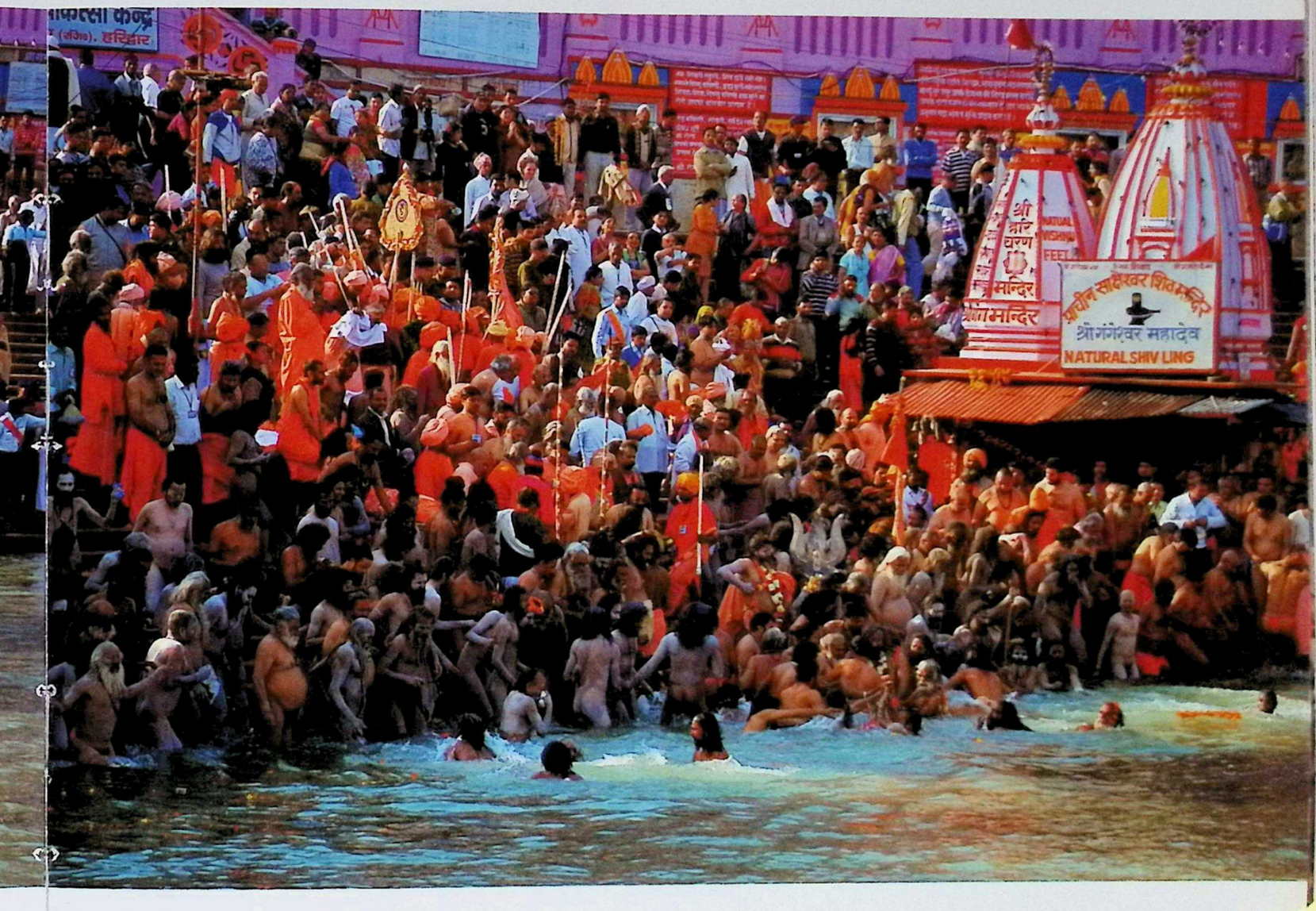

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Battles were fought not only due to foreign rulers, but also due to the enmity amongst different sects of akharas. The Shaiv sannyasins fought with Vaishnav Bairagis in 1760. Nearly 18000 people died in this blood curdling battle. Vaishnav sadhus had boycotted and stopped participating in Kumbh mela. They started to celebrate a separate Kumbh mela in Vrindavan. It was only after British regime that purohits and pundits intervened and they started joining the Haridwar Kumbh. In the current times as well, following the same tradition, first shahi snaan was observed by other akharas except the Vaishnavas.

Sikh warriors had attacked the saints and sages in 1796. All other sects did not allow Nirmal sect akhara to take shahi snan. So, the Maharaja of Patiala attacked the saints and Nirmal akhara was permitted to participate in Kumbh.

Various Styles Adopted by Different Sects of Sadhus

Vaishnavites display a variety of fourteen stigmata and have thirty-six different frontal marks. They also have their Nagas, the regiments of warrior ascetics, sub-sects and reformed orders.

To sum up, a Sadhu can belong to any of the ten schools, seven Akharas, the Naths, the Math, follow the lineages of masters and disciples, be a Krishna lover, follower of Hanuman, of Ganesha, son of Kali or Ganga, Shivaist, Vaishnavite, Jains, Sufi and a Sikh variant. Despite of his dedication to a specific sect, akhara, sect, multiple orders, sub-orders or love for a particular God, he proclaims numerous paths leading to the same goal. It is a matter of making a lifestyle out of truth.

Tonsure Ceremony

It was a heart rendering sight at Alaknanda ghat of Haridwar below the Laltarao bridge. Hair locks falling one after the other - nearly a thousand getting shaved off their heads and hundreds watching from the bridges overhead amidst security. These were initiated in Juna Akhara as renunciants after undergoing 24 hours of rigorous ceremonies.

It all started in the morning hours. First of all, the 'mundan' (shaving of head) ceremony under the tutelage of akhara heads followed by pinda daan, a yajna and Ganga snaan. All hindu rituals were followed by the aspiring renunciant and those willing to enter into sannyashood. Sannyashood is their new birth after renunciating all belongings. They will not earn their food. Whatever will receive in bhiksha (alms) will be their food.

In the evening Swami Avdheshananda, the head of Juna akhara initiated them and following morning the newly initiated renunciants had renounced the worldly affairs to become religious preachers. Amidst loud slogans of 'Har Har Mahadev', these youths took the vows to become sannyasis. Similar initiations were carried out in other akharas as well.

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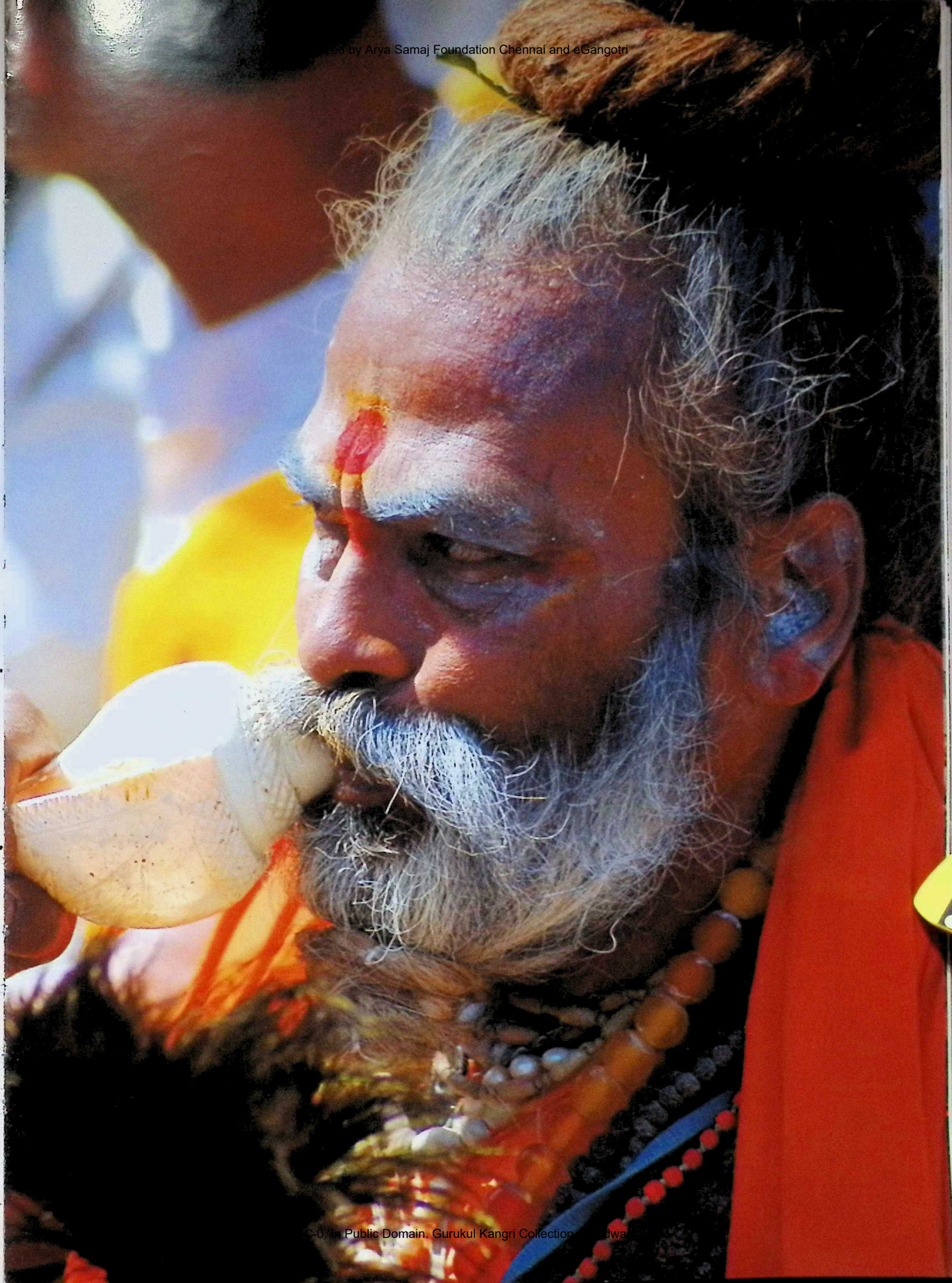

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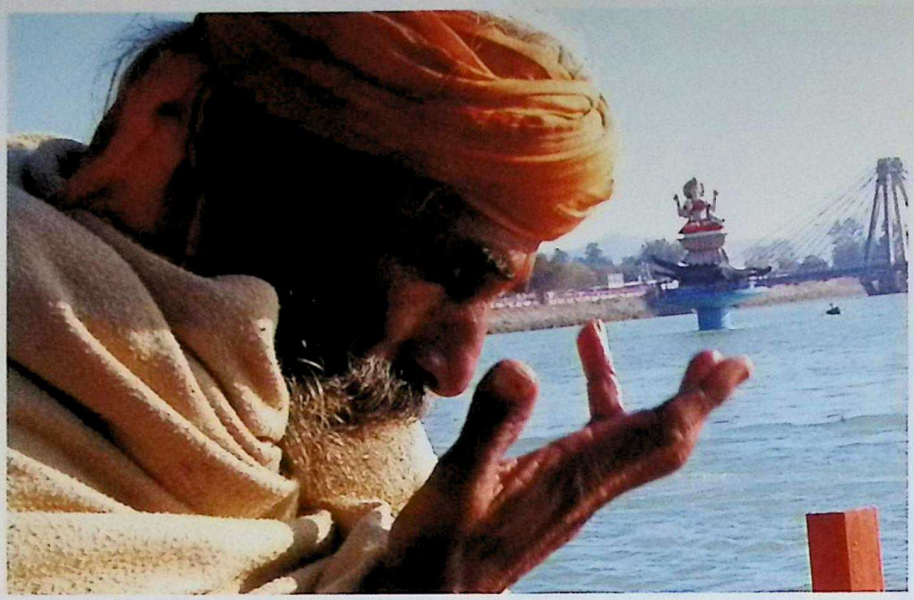

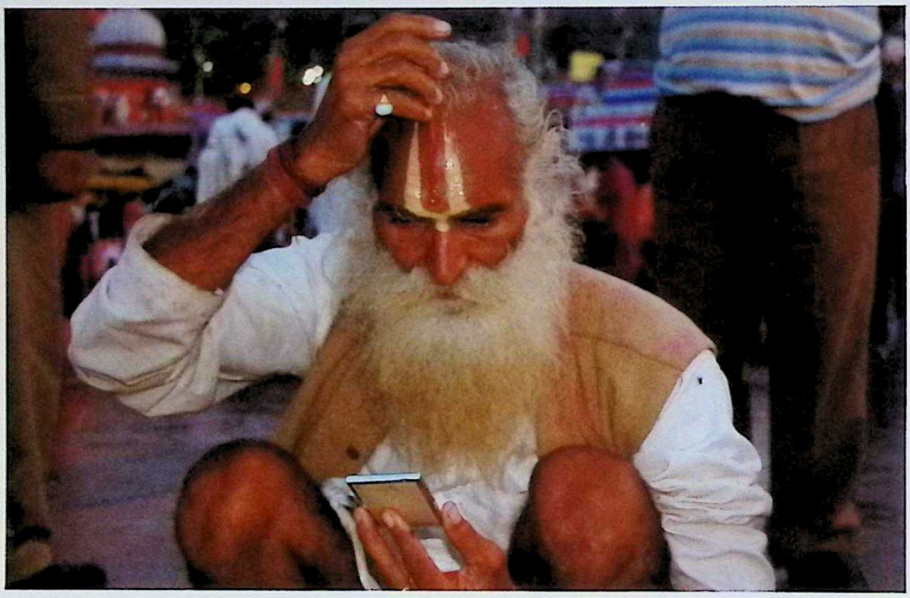

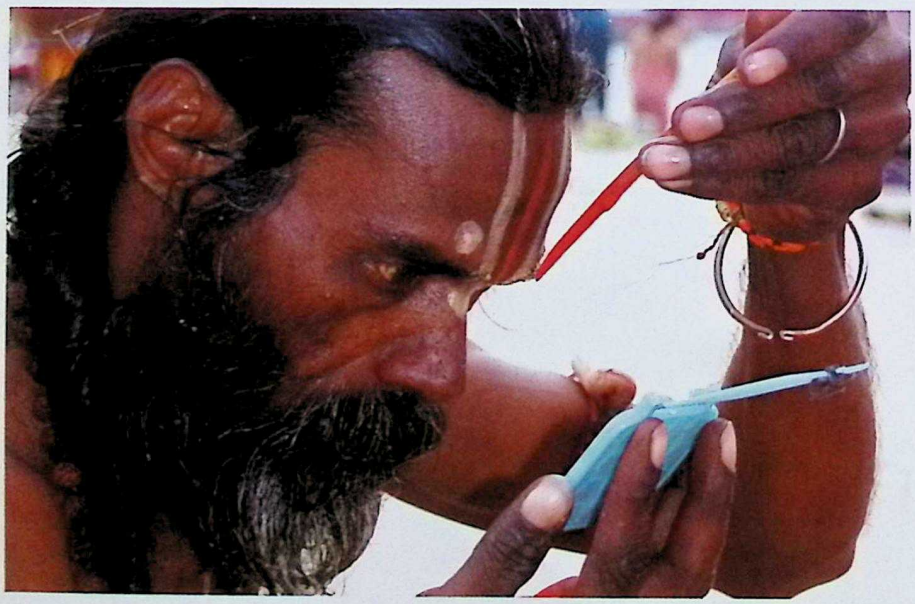

Above: Multi styles of touched marks adopted by different sects of sadhus
Right: New enterants are baptised into priesthood under the alert supervision of experienced seniors

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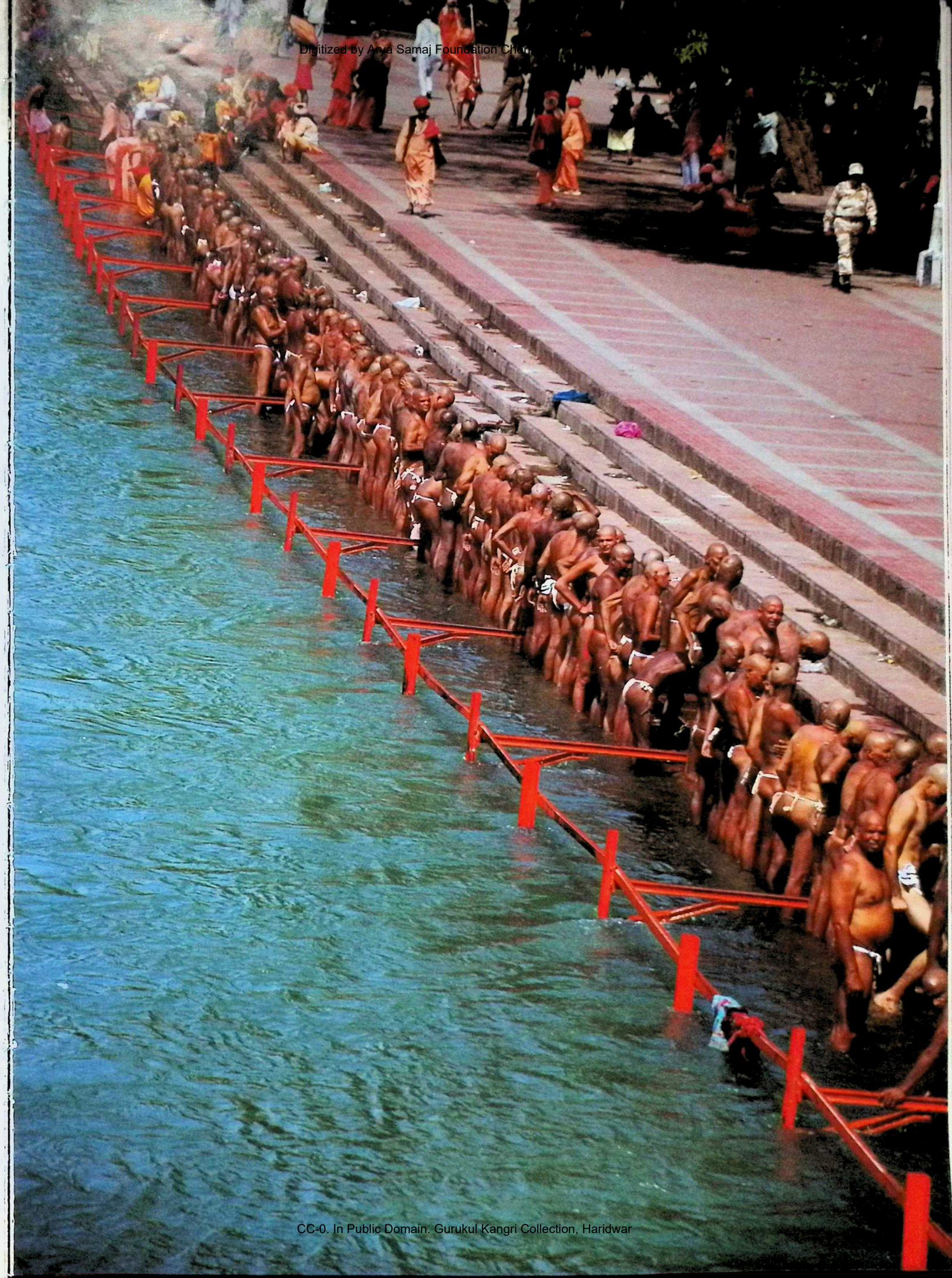

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Tonsure ceremony as part of akhara ritual on Alaknanda Ghat

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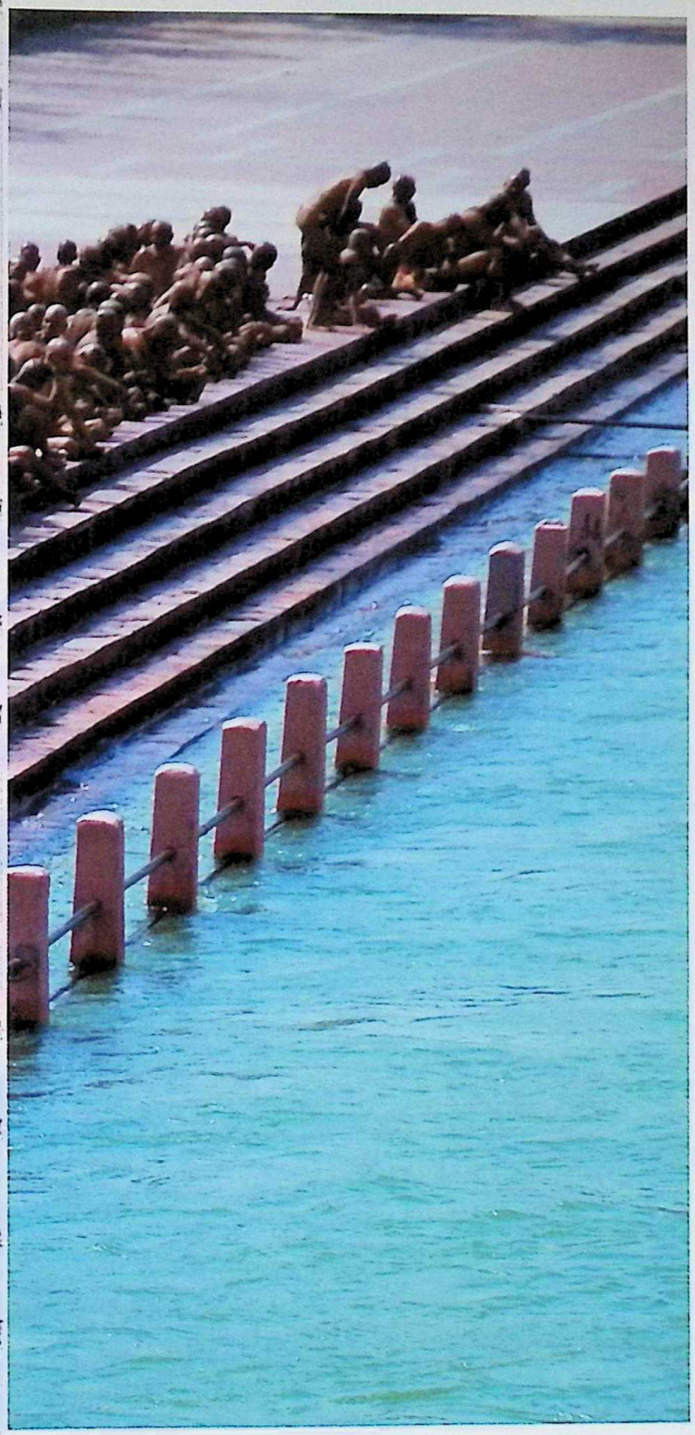

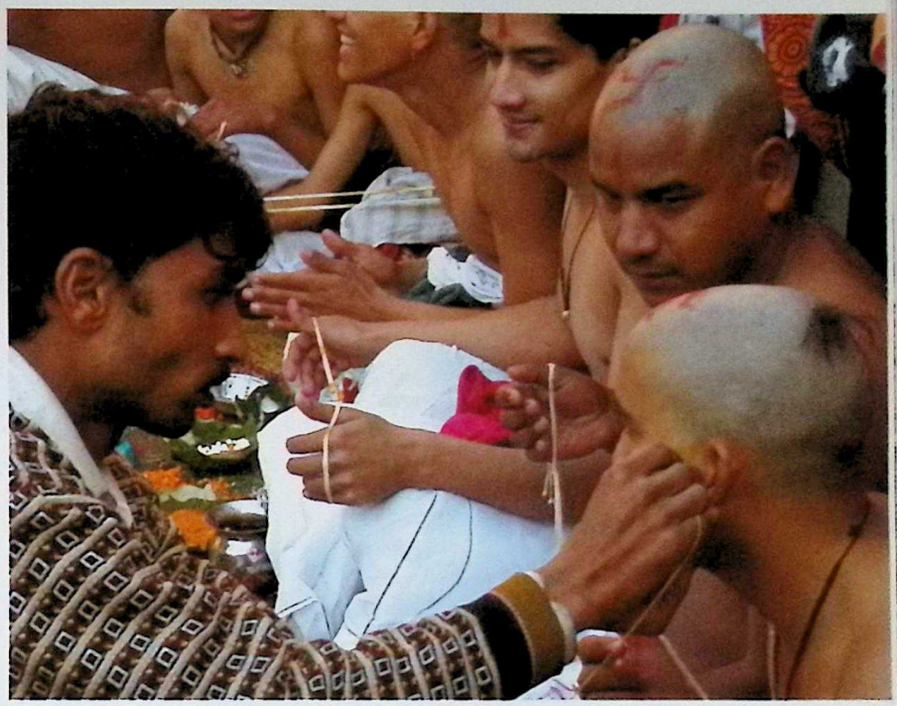

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The Miracles at Kumbh

The 7 year old Columbian Boy joins Juna Akhara

A casual visit to the Juna akhara near Mayadevi temple of Haridwar drew my attention towards a cute little boy draped in saffron garb. This 7 year old Columbian boy, escorted by his mom Mayapurnagiri had recently joined the sect of Juna akhara. It was difficult to catch Ganesha as he ran around the 'dera' premises. Even the ashram inmates and mahants did not want to make him a public figure.

With a touch of typical American accent, this South American lady told me about her son.

"I came with my son for the Mahakumbh mela. Though he is my son, he is my gurubhai as well, as we have been initiated by Sri Mahant Taragiri Maharaj of Juna Akhara. He has his ashram in Gurgaon. We now share guru-chela or teacher-disciple, relationship."

What prompted her to come to India?

"O, I love India in every respect," said Gurumai.

"How long are you going to stay?" I asked.

"It all depends on my guru's orders, as he wishes. We are his guests and followers. As he will direct, so will be our movement. Till the last snaan, we shall be staying in the akhara," replied the beautiful American mother. She was dressed in a Sari. She was also wearing a rosary with Rudraksha.

Not keen for publicity, the mom-son duo were hesitant to disclose much about their past life but Ganesha smiled posing for the photograph. With a promise to send her photos, I left the dera.

Growing in Spiritual Terms

When it comes to the 'longest' under the category of moustaches, hair or beard, India indeed has some of the best record holders. Shamsher Singh of India might be the famous record holder for having the longest beard measuring at six feet. However, the Kumbh mela of Haridwar showcased some not-so-famous yet very impressive record holders.

Amar giri Naga baba shares his dhooni (holy hearth) with two other sadhus and he has grown his hair too. The elephant-faced Gajanan giri and Yogi Budhnath of Alwar started growing his beard during the last Kumbh mela in Haridwar. In a span of twelve years it has reached 5 feet 3 inches.

Fascinated by his long jatas (matted hair locks), I stepped forward to click him but another surprise was waiting for me. He unfolded the long folds of his beard and lol! It almost touched his feet.

"I started growing this beard from previous Kumbh mela in Haridwar," said the stout hermit. A Resident of Delhi, this fully covered sadhu of Naga Baba tradition has his ashram in Samaypur Badli, Raja Vihar colony. This group of renunciants is ardent followers of Lord Dattatreya.

Having lived in communities for many years in Delhi, these naga sadhus followed a dress code, unlike others, who remain naked and ash smeared.

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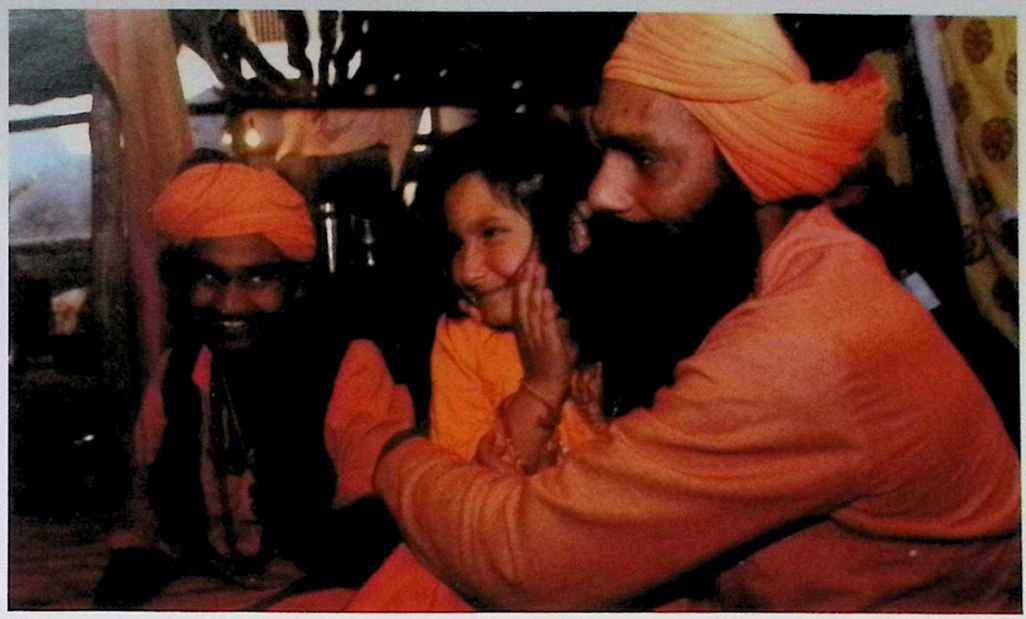

Top: 7 year old Ganesha (a Columbian boy) who joined Juna akhara plays with fellow saints of akhara.
Middle: Ganesha with her mom in Mayadevi temple where akhara camp was tented.
Bottom: Amar Giri baba with long beard measuring 5feet 3 inches.

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A Grand Affair

A saint from Awahan akhara, Gajanand Giri, who had his face shaped like the trunk of an elephant, was much of the centre of attraction in this Kumbh mela. He was a sadhu of the same Awahan akhara whose deity is Lord Ganesha. Nature had gifted the sadhu its Ganesha like face.

Hailing from Faridabad, this renunciant had one eye, one nose and one-half face. He lived only on milk and fruits. His face and nose were elongated with fleshy loose skin in the form of a trunk similar to those of Lord Ganesha. The hanging nose was just a symbolic of the trunk of the elephant. Many devotees visited the holy saint to take blessings and apply bhasma from his dhooni (fireplace).

Gajanan giri and Mahamandaleshwars sat on the shahi gaddis (royal thrones) atop the elephants. They were part of the peshwais of Kumbh mela. The carrier elephants didn't fail to steal the show. The foreigners did not miss a chance to offer bananas to the carrier elephant.

A Jew turned Hindu for Spirituality

Marcie from the United States of America found Kumbh mela and Indian tradition simply fantastic. She is Jewish by birth but almost a Hindu now. She has lived in India for few months and remodeled herself according to Hindu customs.

Marcie first came to India in Febuary 2006 and visited twice thereafter.

"Spirituality attracted me towards India and I am excited to see more of such Kumbh mela processions. I feel lot of energy here which is all through lacking in my country America," quipped the lady.

"The elephantine thrones look so majestic and awesome and the best part is even their keepers are friendly and allow us to feed and fiddle with the elephants," Marcie added.

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Top: Gayanand Giri with Elephantine nose was the major attraction of Kumbh Mela.
Middle: A tourist offers bananas to an elephant in Kumbh mela procession.

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Shiva's Matted Hair Locks

Shivaratri was over but the holy city of Haridwar was still buzzing with mythological emblems of Lord Shiva. Ross and Meesha wore matted locks and could be seen wandering in the Mahamandaleshwar Nagar at Chandi Dweep, just below the longest Chandi ghat bridge.

"I grew these locks for pretty long time, almost a period of ten years," revealed Ross, who didn't want to disclose his nationality.

"The whole earth is my home," beamed the young white- skinned and blue-eyed sadhu. The couple greeted everyone with 'Om' so it was difficult to guess their native country and mother tongue.

Not only is this couple attracted to Indian mythology in dress and tress sense, but also spellbound by the language of the Gyan margis. They believe that Supreme can be sought through knowledge. Speculating, he must be from Pilot baba's order or Soham Baba, whose foreigner devotees were coming to the area, I mustered courage to ask about his monastic order.

"We are just the seekers of truth and truth doesn't have any sect or order. Truth is universal and cannot be bound to some order," replied Ross.

Meesha didn't speak much but was cautiously holding the burning incense stick probably to ward off the insects or to get the feeling of ecstatic fragrance. Another passerby, woman devotee of Lord Shiva walked past with her water pot (steel can).

This Indian 'Gurumai' clad in an ochre-coloured sannyasi garb had Shiva's Trident and Tabor attached to her waist.

"Meri dhooni paas mein hi hai, tum ana," said she and invited me to her holy hearth under the bridge. With each dawning day, Kumbh mela unfolded new surprises.

Puffing Sadhus

Standing on the other side of the Peshwai and leading for the royal snaan, I wanted to have a close look at the chillum (conical clay pipe) through which one saffron-coloured sadhu was puffing. Gathering guts, I crossed the procession of akhara sadhus to have a gossip with the smoking sadhu. I requested to catch him on my camera, doing his puffing action. My request was naturally and smilingly accepted by that middle-aged sadhu. Carefully, he held his chillum amidst the folds of saffron cloth and exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"It is Lord Shiva's Prasad (blessing) and helps in controlling one's desires. Kam ka daman karney mein sahayata karta hai (it helps in controlling one's sexual desires). In this world, the two most difficult things to control are — one's hunger and one's sexual desire. The natural herbs, which are used in chillum, help curb one's senses," the sadhu from the Juna akhara told me.

These intoxicating materials and herbs used by wandering monks are of different varieties – charas, ganja, bhang. The use of these intoxications is also in different modes. Some of them are used by soaking, some by grinding and others after boiling and preparing a decoction.

The crushed herbs like bhang and dhatura grow abundantly in the forests of the hill state. These are consumed with milk or water. Since these parivrajaks (wandering monks) travel in the Himalayan hills in the states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, there is no dearth of these wildly grown herbs. Uttarakhand state has intoxicating herbs in bounties.

Sulfa or ganja (canabis) used in chillum is also reported to be sold at some government-licensed shops but these are very few in terms of number. Two types of techniques are prevalent for using chillum; one-handed technique and two-handed technique. Both have an apparent goal of keeping one's lips from touching the chillum or the cloth filter. And hush...the smoke enveloped the baba's face and everyone around.

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Ross and Meesha fascinated by Indian Sadhus had grown matted looks. They visit the holy city searching for peace.

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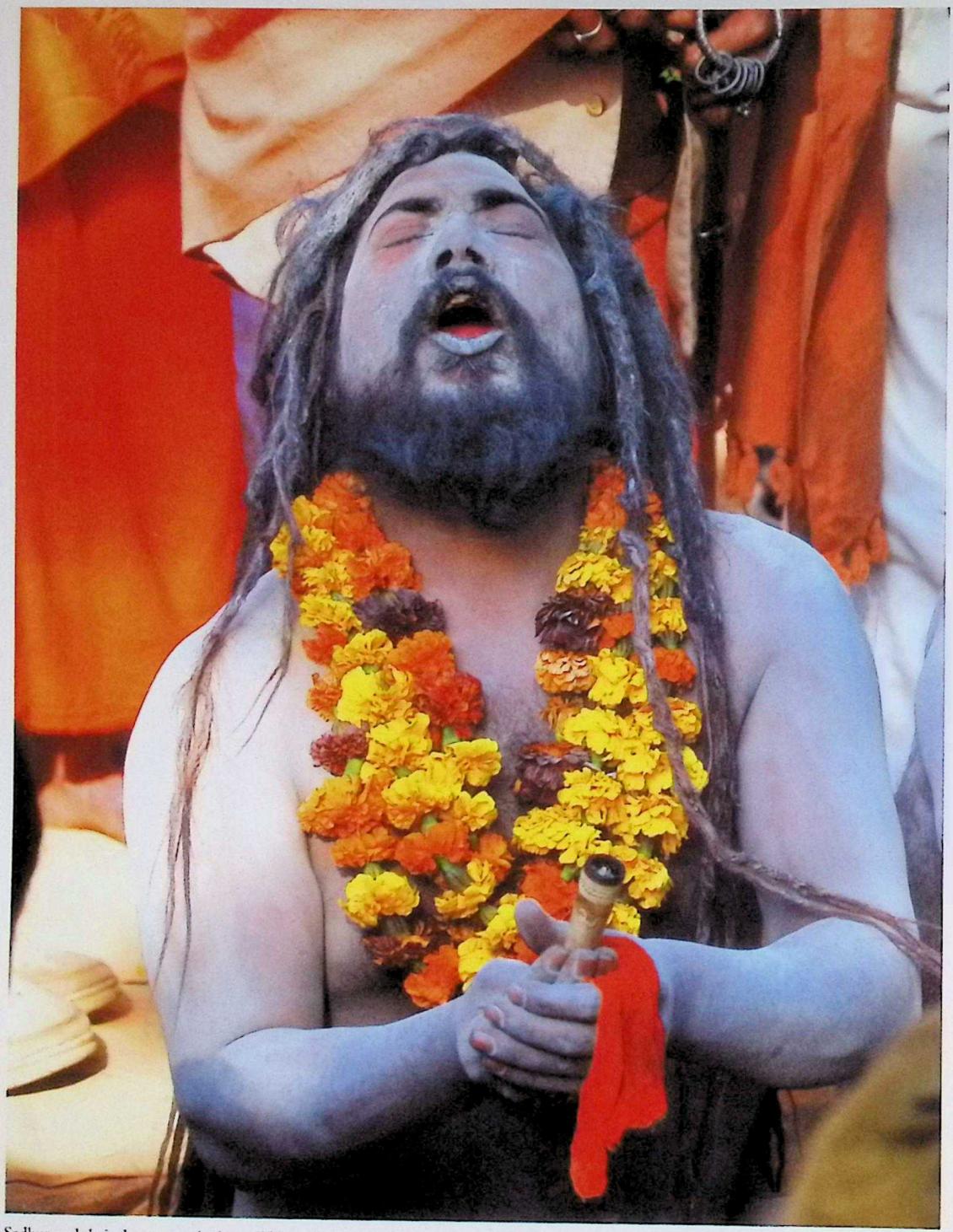

Sadhus and their devotees enjoying mild intoxicating smokes

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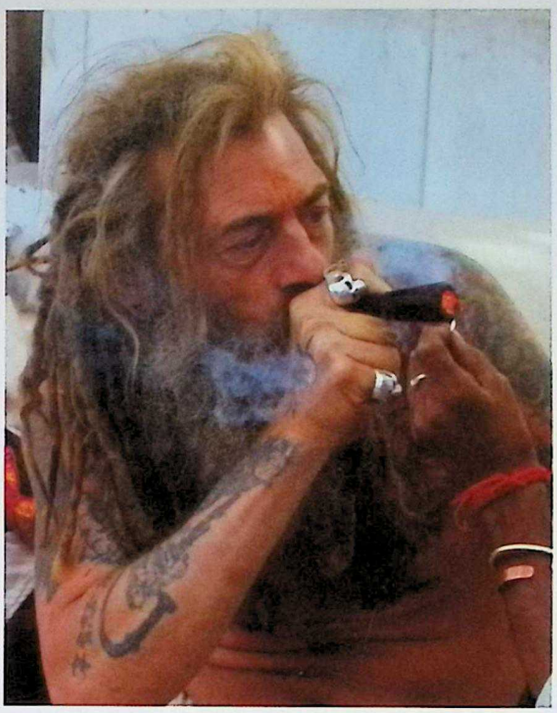

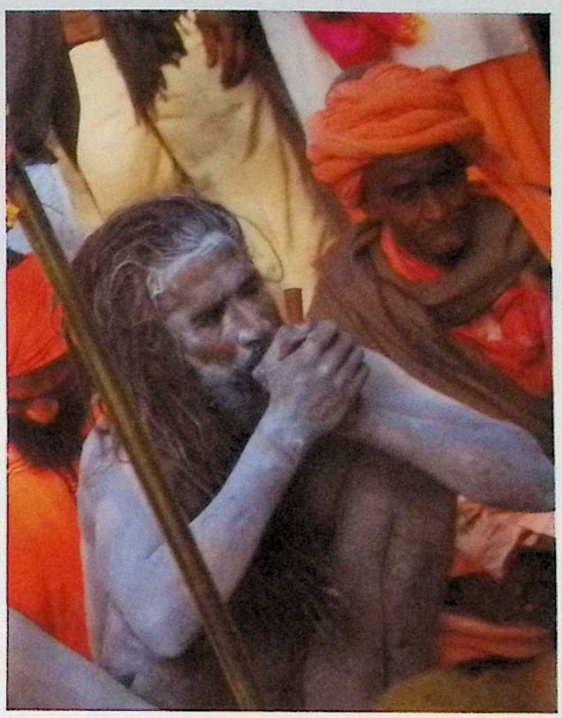

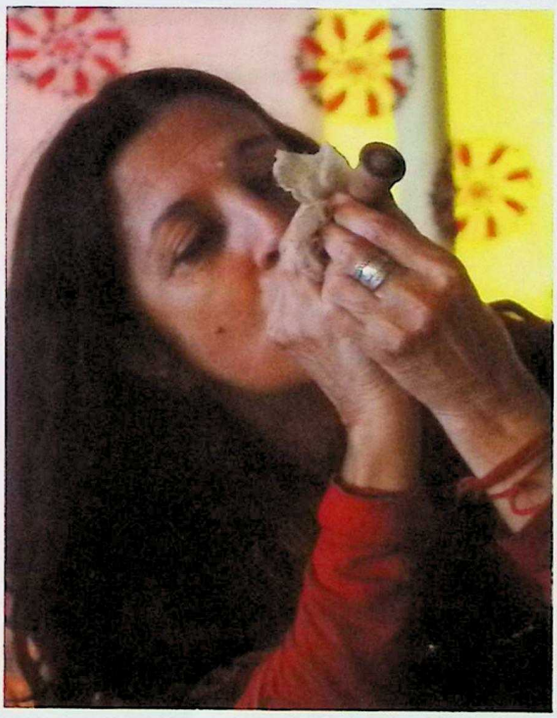

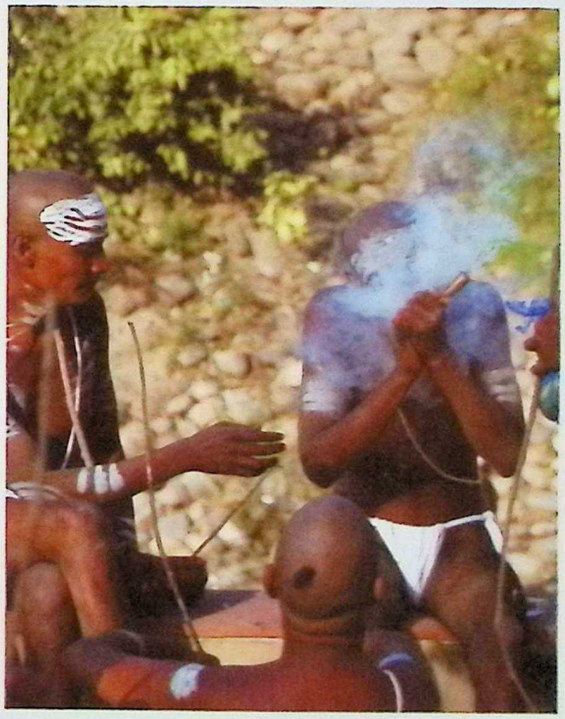

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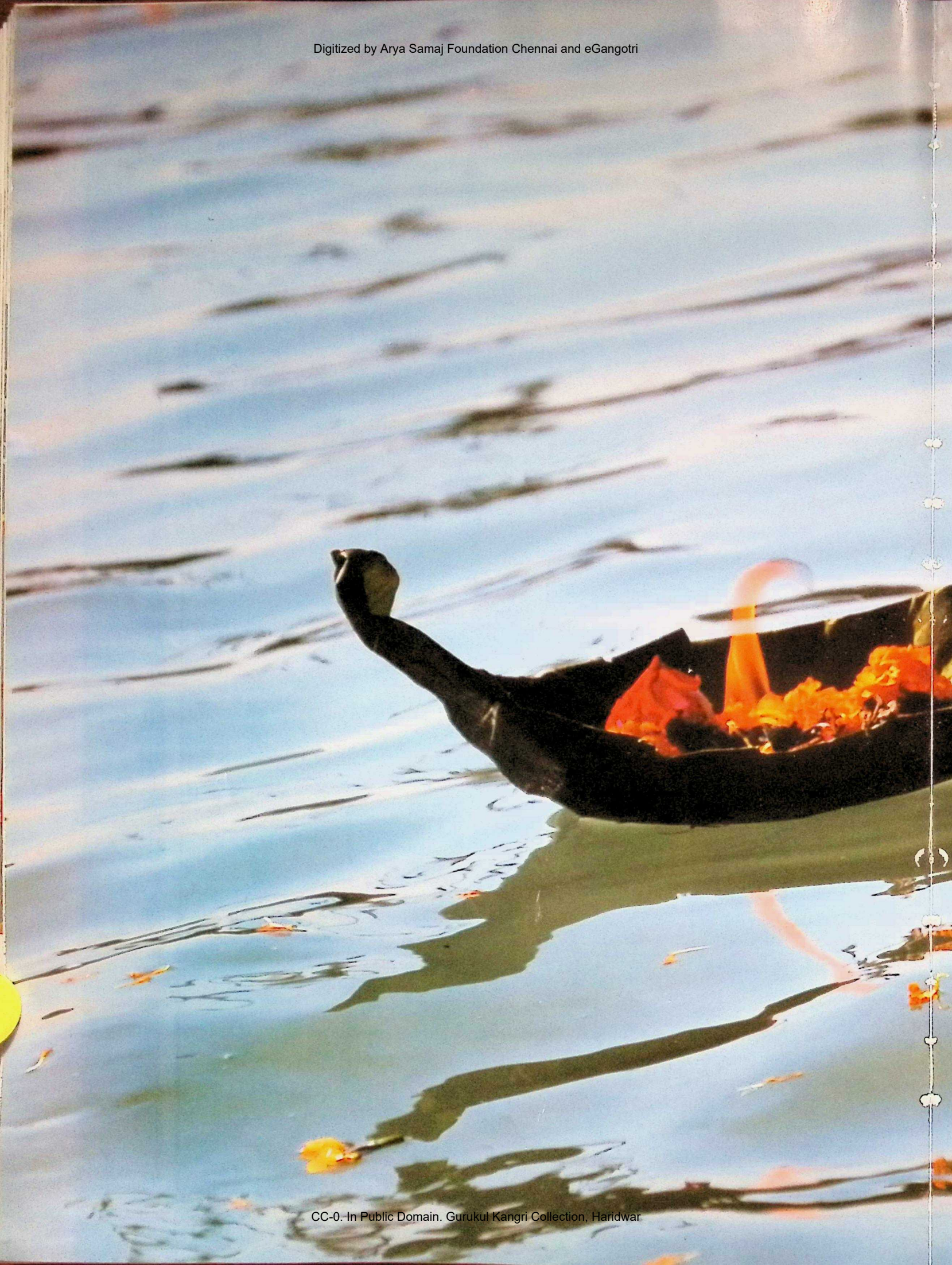

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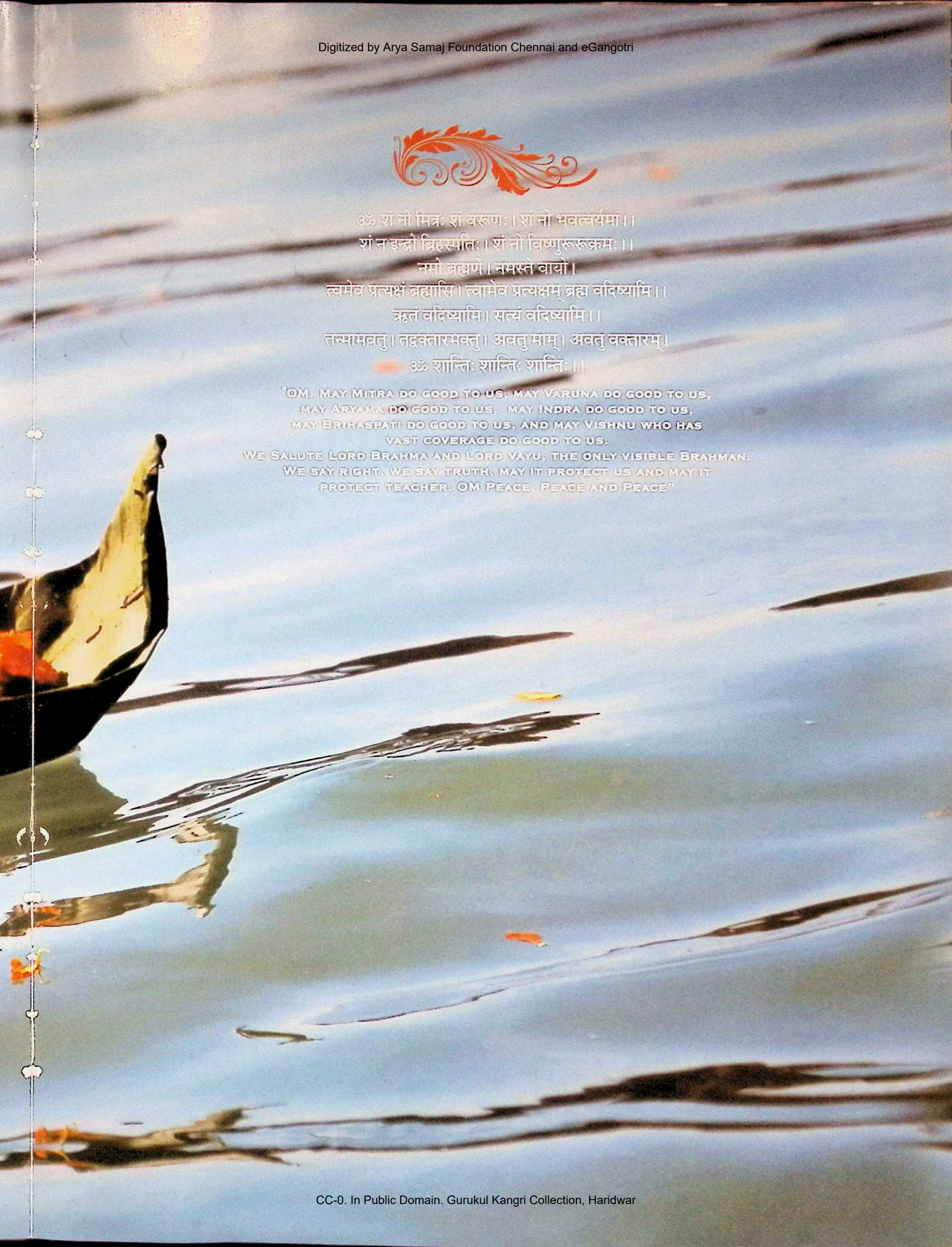

ॐ शं नो मित्रः शं वरुणः। शं नो भवत्वर्यमा।।
शं न इन्द्रो बृहस्पतिः। शं नो विष्णुरुरुक्रमः।।
नमो ब्रह्मणे। नमस्ते वायो।
त्वमेव प्रत्यक्षं ब्रह्मासि। त्वामेव प्रत्यक्षम् ब्रह्म वदिष्यामि।।
ऋतं वदिष्यामि। सत्यं वदिष्यामि।।
तन्मामवतु। तद्वक्तारमवतु। अवतु माम्। अवतु वक्तारम्।
ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः।।

"OM. MAY MITRA DO GOOD TO US, MAY VARUNA DO GOOD TO US,
MAY ARYAMA DO GOOD TO US, MAY INDRA DO GOOD TO US,
MAY BRIHASPATI DO GOOD TO US, AND MAY VISHNU WHO HAS
VAST COVERAGE DO GOOD TO US.
WE SALUTE LORD BRAHMA AND LORD VAYU, THE ONLY VISIBLE BRAHMAN.
WE SAY RIGHT, WE SAY TRUTH, MAY IT PROTECT US AND MAY IT
PROTECT TEACHER. OM PEACE, PEACE AND PEACE"

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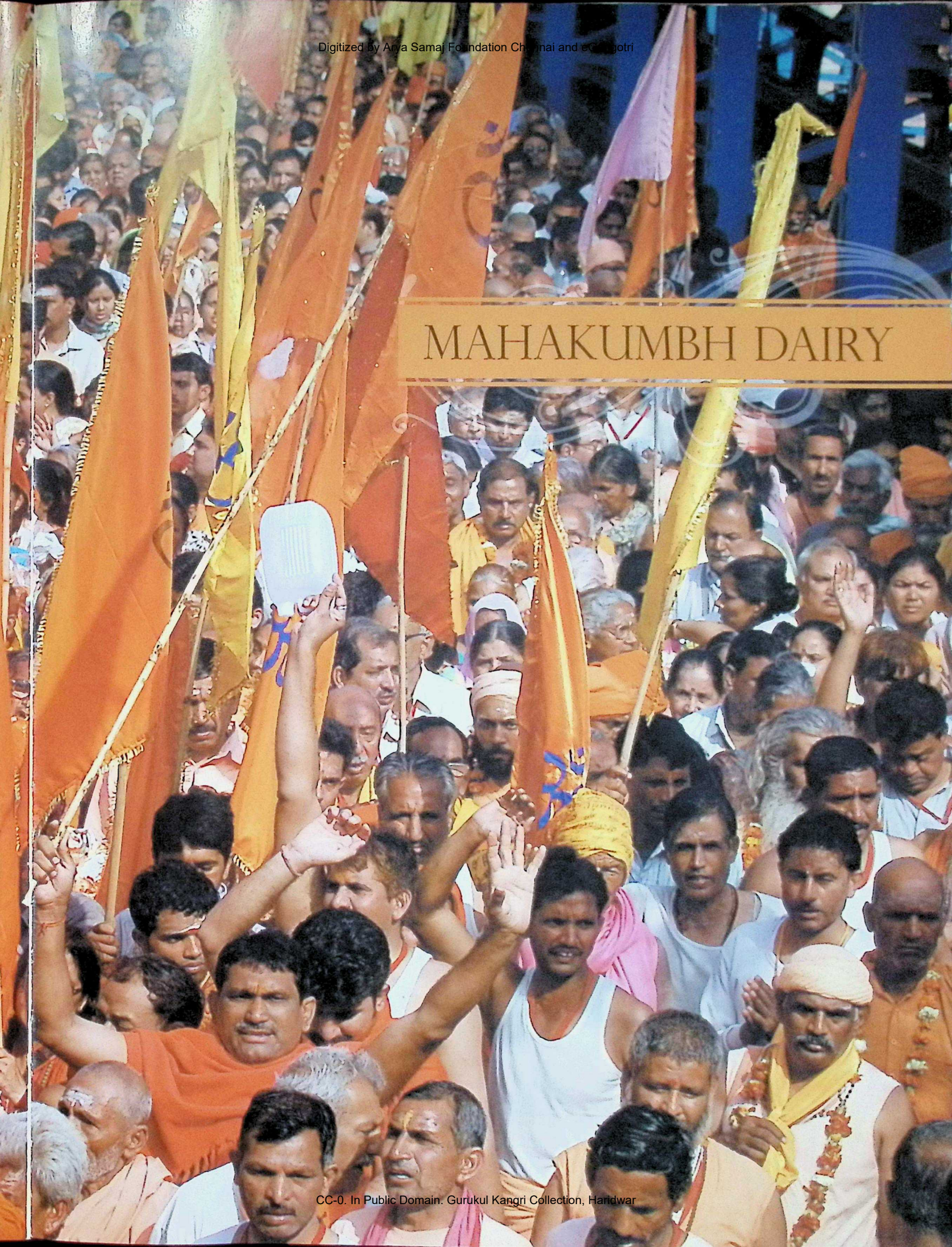

MAHAKUMBH DAIRY

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At each Kumbh mela, the members of the sanyasi akharas command precedency over all others and bathe in the holy water first at the most auspicious moment. Just 4 days before the propitious bathing day that falls on Makar Sankranti, all 13 akharas, sants and mahants from different ashrams - big and small - were seen engrossed in giving final touches to their programs. Eleven main snaans (holy dips) starting from 14th Jan and ending on 28th April were scheduled for devotees present at the fair from different parts of world.

'Mangal Raths' (vehicles proceeding to the auspicious spot) ranging from Tata Safaris to Maruti vans, belonging to various akharas were seen voyaging across the holy city in quest of provisions being made for the disciples and aficionados who flocked in millions.

Shahi Snans

Three Shahi Snans (royal baths) were observed on three different dates; 12th february, 15th March and 14th April. These Snans are exclusively reserved for Naga Sadhus and Sannyasis. This is an attempt to revere warrior ascetics who have renounced worldly affairs and desires for self-realization.

Peshwais

The Akhara parishad national chief, Mahant Gyandas in a joint meeting with mahamantri and others allotted special dates for peshwais (processions) to different akharas. Juna akhara was assigned January 30 as the auspicious day to take out royal procession and February 12 for Niranjani akhara.

11 main snans (bathing dates) declared by the administration were:

14 January Makar Sankranti
15 January Mauni Amavasya
20 January Basant Panchmi
30 January Magh Purnima
12 February Mahashivaratri (shahi snan)
15 March Somvati Amavasya (shahi snan)
16 March Navsamvatsaram snan
24 March Ramnavmi
30 March Chaitra purnima snan
14 April Maesh Sankranti (shahi snan)
28 April Vaishakh Adhimas Purnima

With decent gap between dates for shahi snans and peshwais, many Dandi sadhus and sannyasis from different sampradayas flew to Allahabad with an aim to attend Magh parva. This parva usually begins from purnima of Magh month and lasts till the end of January.

Holy Bath on January 14, 2010

The Mahakumbh mela finally saw its day of light. It was a quiet start before dawn in chilly waters. The foggy ghats of Har Ki Pauri appeared serene on the auspicious day of Makar Sankranti. Ganga looked pleasantly fresh and placid as always. Dense fog, piercing air and chilly water could not deter devotees from indulging in holy dip. Under a thick carpet of security, over 10 lakh devotees defied the cold to follow the ritual that began as early as 3.30 am. Only a few sadhus hung loose but foreigners caught the eye.

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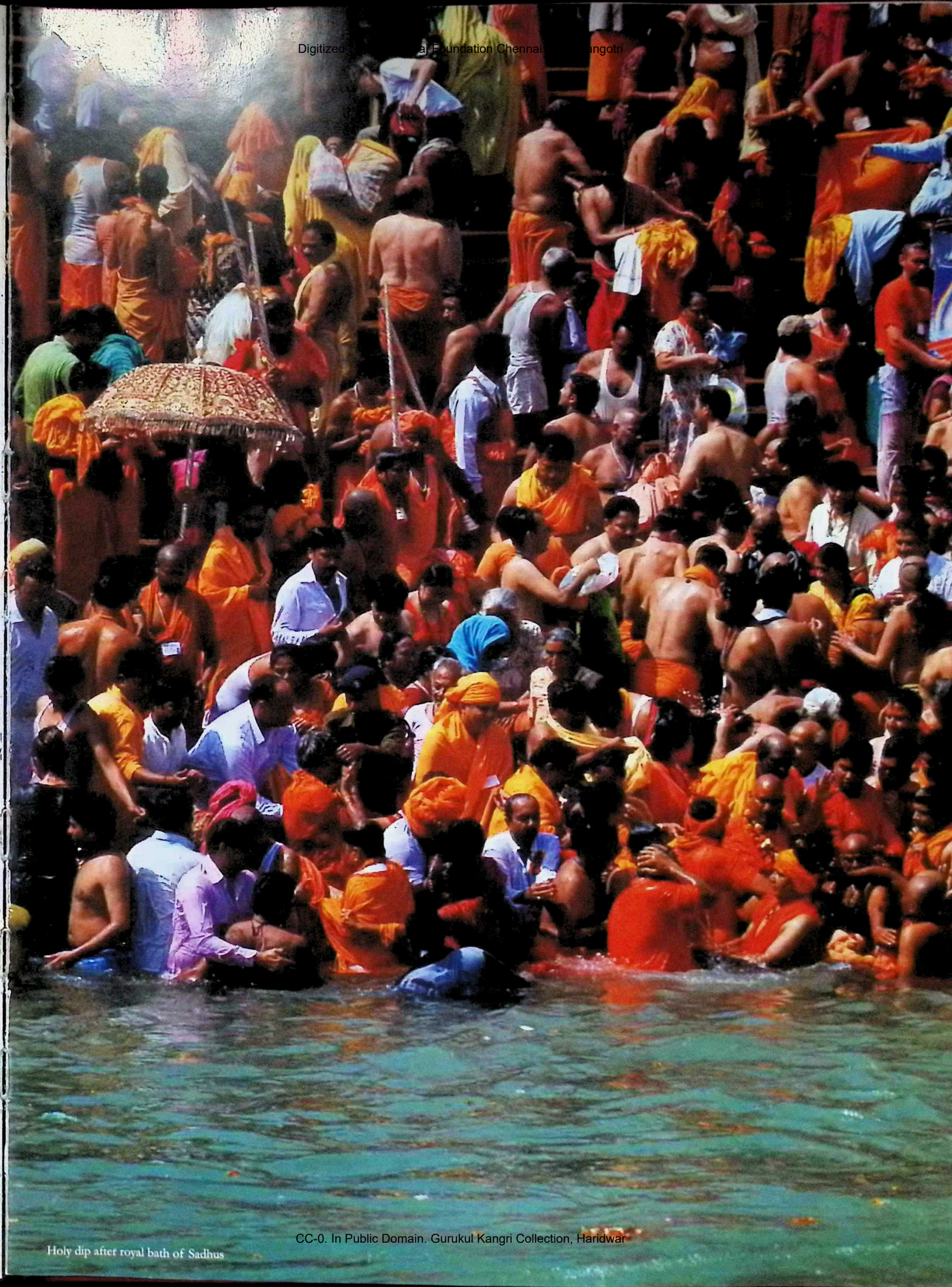

Holy dip after royal bath of Sadhus

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Naga Sadhus raising slogans of glory of Lord Shiva during royal bath

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The impenetrable fog gave way to a colossal sun by mid-morning and the crowd dissociated their bodies from shawls and caps that seem to be an inseparable part a few hours back and plunged into the ice cold water. Foreigners who shuttled between Haridwar and Rishikesh marked their presence, but more troops were expected. The chilly weather was declared the culprit and a dip in number of pilgrims could be perceived clearly.

A Serene Hassle Free Start of Kumbh Mela

As the sun come up, the congregation raised to a sky-rocketing number. The crowd that swarmed in at steady pace could have been the reason of anxiety at any other site across the globe. But the Kumbh fair was remarkable. There was no feeling of being 'crowded in'. It was a joint commitment of attendees that made people, seek interest in the service of others than in the other. Each did his own thing, holding onto the swaying chains to maintain equilibrium as they dunked recurrently into the water.

Women with petticoats (lose frilly cloth with string worn under a saree) tied at the chest, were soaked into rituals and sacraments. Towel curtains adorned the entire ghat to use as changing rooms after taking bath. Devotee from all corners of the country and world irrespective of ages and cultures joined in the rituals freely.

Auspicious Makar Sankranti Snan

Makar Sankranti was observed as the most important date for bathing during the Kumbh Mela (2010) in Haridwar. As stated by the Vedic solar calendar, the period Mid-January, when Kumbh mela customarily initiates is, astrologically very special and propitious. At this moment in time, the sun passes through the winter solstice, from the Tropic of Cancer to the Tropic of Capricorn. The Sun drives to 'Uttarayan' from this day of Makar Sankranti.

'Makar' is a zodiac and 'Sankranti' means transition. On the day of Makar Sankranti, the sun enters Makar rashi (Capricorn Zodiac). This astrological changeover is referred to as 'Makara Sankramana' or Makar Sankranti, which literally means transition. This transition is of great significance for the reason that it is in a positive direction. The day gets brighter and warmer with the onset of Makar Sankranti. It denotes a fresh start of a new season and end of winter.

Significance of Mantra Chanting during Bathing

One of the most popular and most widely chanted Hindu mantra is the Gayatari mantra while taking dip in Ganges. This is dedicated to God Surya. Along with Sun, rivers too were worshipped by the Hindus. The worship of the Sun and rivers started after the realization that life exists because of light and water.

According to a popular belief, a holy dip in Ganga during Kumbh mela on Makar Sankranti cleanses the sins of a devotee and prepares him for Moksha. Another legend states the waters of Ganges possess unique healing powers especially during the period on the account of exclusive alignment of Sun, Moon and Jupiter.

Kumbh – The Centre for Spiritual Reality

The river was at its loveliest state. The Ganges was a torrent, spurting along purposively with exquisite blue-green, translucent form and gleaming under the warm sun. Beyond faith and conviction, the Mahakumbh festival brought to its pursuers, the much sought-after spiritual reality.

With the mercury dropping to an all-time low of four degrees, the holy waters could bestow the best of chill to its devotees while washing away their sins. It was the first time that mercury dipped generously. The last two Maha Kumbhs in the years 1986 and 1998 recorded temperatures between six and eight degrees respectively.

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One independent Sadhu performing personal prayers

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After the royal bath (Shahi snan) of various sects is over, the public is allowed to take bath.

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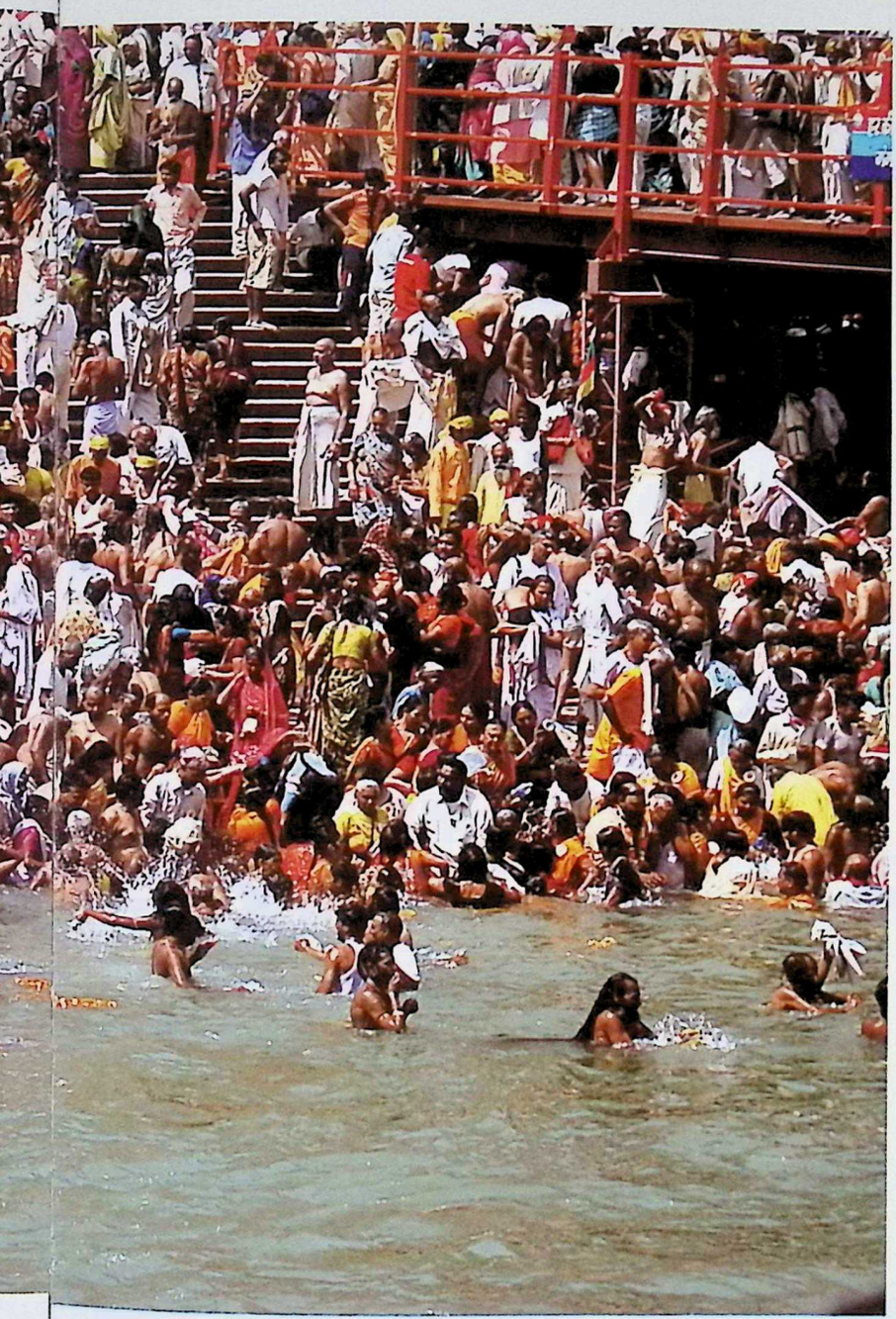

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Arrangements for 50 lakh people on Makar Sankranti

According to a claim made by Dr Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank', the chief minister of Uttarakhand, over 100 temporary cottages had been set up across the 26 ghats in Haridwar to serve the pilgrims. The security was tight and employed at an impressive rate. Interestingly, security forces too went for the holy dip early in morning.

Lakhs of devotees at the Maha Kumbh took a holy dip soon after the solar eclipse. Incongruously, the day coincided with 'Mauni Amavasya', making it an esteemed opportunity for them. The Solar eclipse following Makar sankranti befalls after 565 years, claim the astrologers. Surprisingly, this Kumbh fair also witnessed this rare phenomenon. Back in the year 1535, solar eclipse had occurred on January 13 and Makar sankranti on January 14. This year, it was the other way round. Makar sankranti fell on January 14 and there was solar eclipse on January 15. What made this Kumbh historical and rare is coinciding of solar eclipse with Mauni Amavasya.

Legends have it that donating a copper vessel (kalash) in the form of Kumbh provides the boon of good health and well-being for 12 years. Panch gavya, panch ratan, panch pallav, kumkum, gangajal, Guggul, shatavari, mulheti, bel and turmeric are used in kalash worship ritual. While taking a dip, devotees worshipped kumbh vessel and poured the holy water over their head.

Delight for Scientists

The celestial vista was a delight for scientists across India. It had brought the festivities of Kumbh to a cessation in the morning as devotees preferred to meditate and perform 'havan' to ward off the ill effects of the eclipse.

People, who congregated on Makar Sankranti, eagerly waited for the eclipse to end before hitting the ghats for the 'snan'. It is auspicious for devotees to take a holy dip soon after the solar eclipse is over.

One could also hear clear announcements on the public address system informing people about the eclipse that started here precisely at 11.58 a.m. and continued till 3.12 p.m. Mundan sanskars (head shaving ceremonies) were also performed at the ghats.

Basant Panchmi Snan (January 20)

Little away from the commoner's sought-after 'Har ki pauri ghat', is a chain of ghats at a gap of every 500 metres along the Ganges canal. These are a hot favorite amongst the tourists. The third main bathing day of Kumbh that coincided with the Basant festival (festival of spring) was marked by thousands of devotees who flocked to take a dip in the chilling waters of the Ganges on the following ghats:

Vivekananda ghat, Vishwakarma ghat, Yadav dharamshala ghat, Prem nagar ashram ghat, Kabir Panthi ghat.

Until noon, the foggy weather curbed the flow of pilgrims for snan. Confronting the deadly chill, an estimated 8 lakh individuals flocked Haridwar at different bathing ghats of the holy river. Approximately 6,000 devotees had already whizzed in by rail a dy before and about 2,500 made their entry by road. Furthermore, 25 additional buses were reserved which culminated to a total of 150 busses for the main snan of basant panchmi.

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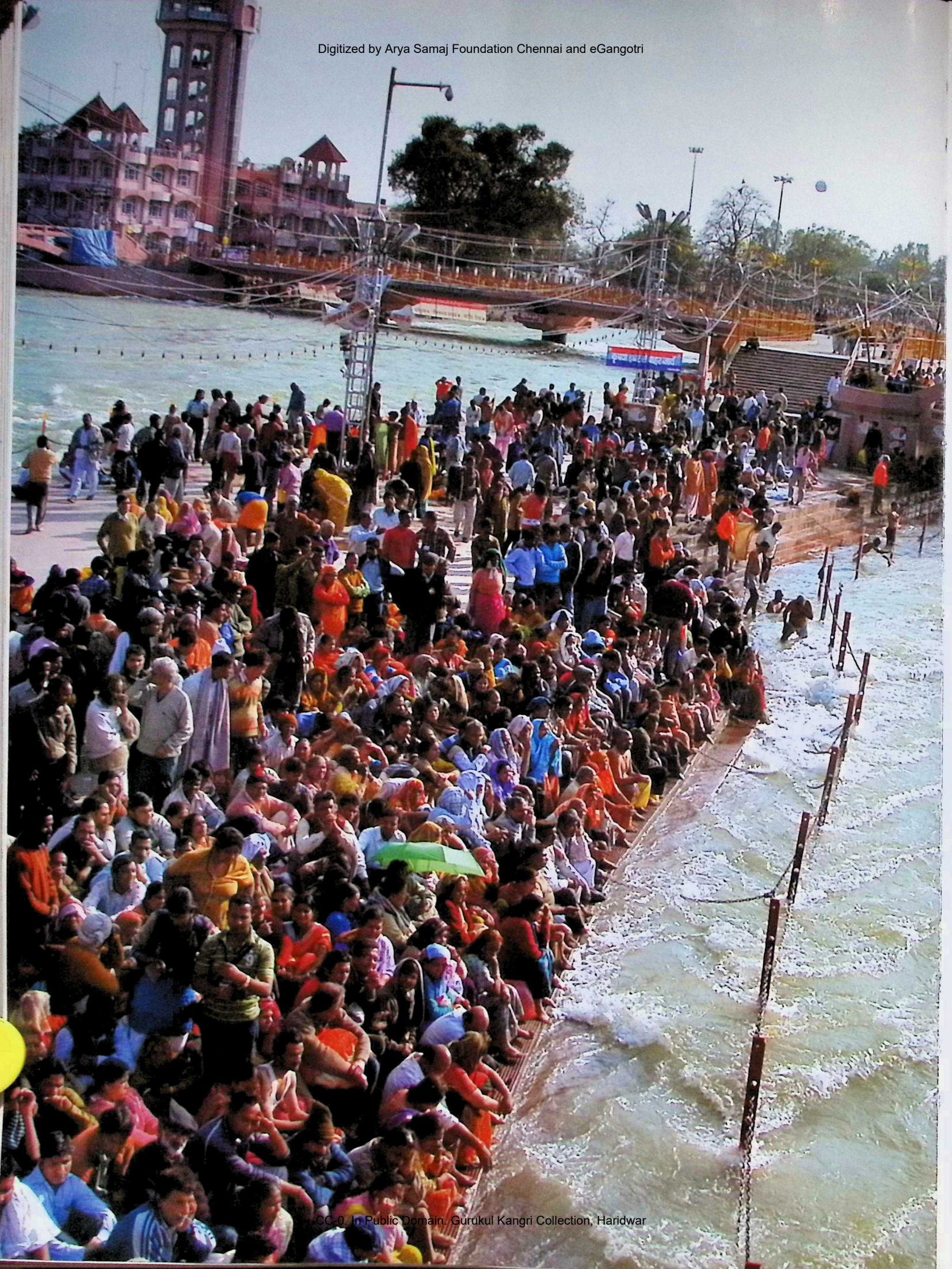

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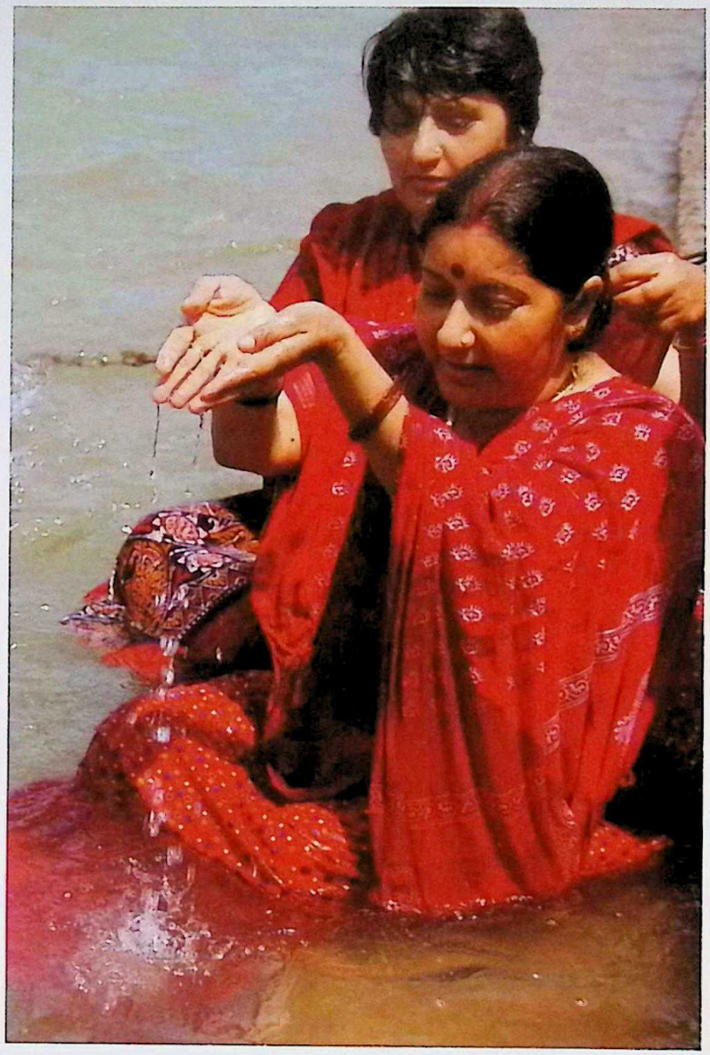

Left: Most of the time other pilgrims enjoy the activities around the bathing areas
Above: VIPs offering their prayers as ordinary citizens of India

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Spring Fest inaugurates amidst Piercing Chill

As stated by Hindu Lunar calendar, owing to Adhika mas (an extra month) falling this year, basant panchmi made its way to calendar much before the scheduled date which usually falls in the month of February. Many devotees, who reached the holy city from different parts of the country, came to know about early arrival of spring amidst the chilly weather.

"Was there a slip-up amongst gods?" I thought.

"No buzzing bees and the smiling pansies in this misty weather," quipped a youngster who stood quivering after the holy dip in hipster jeans and dropping neck top.

As the day progressed, the misty layer lifted but fog and its close companion smog still swathed the areas near the city. Nearly 4 lakh (0.4 million) devotees reportedly took bath at 'Har Ki Pauri' amongst the chill and fog with ice cold water to add to the thrill.

Preparations for Peshwais Began

The next on the agenda for Kumbh administration was installation of dharma dhwajas or staffs of renunciation at 5 prominent akharas amidst grand ceremonies. Peshwais were the next to follow at Mahakumbh mela. The ceremony of dharma dhwaja was accomplished among massive crowds, inspiring slogans, songs depicting glories of the Naga sadhus and the Vedic rituals by Juna, Agni, Awahan, Mahanirvani and Atal akharas. The staffs were 52 yards long and weighed 3 ton. These were installed by saints from the 4, 13, 14 and 16 madhi (category).

The environment reverberated with melodious sounds of pious musical instruments such as cymbals, bells, conches among many others throughout the ceremony. The world witnessed the first peshwai (royal procession) on January 30 by Juna Akhara. The Akhara sadhus were dedicated themselves to give final touches to their royal raths (chariots) and religious extravaganza. Elephants were hired and musical bands booked. Naga Sadhus, the illustrious naked holy men led the peshwai. These warrior ascetics had come out from caves and cliffs only for the Mahakumbh festival. The Juna akhara, led by Swami Avdheshanand Giri, is the largest of the 13 akharas. More than 2.5 lakh naga sadhus were expected to take part in the main shahi snan scheduled in April on Baisakhi day.

Competitions are held amongst various akharas to prove their mettle. Separate teams are created amongst the sadhus and renunciants. The winners are declared by commoners. They decide the best out of the lot.

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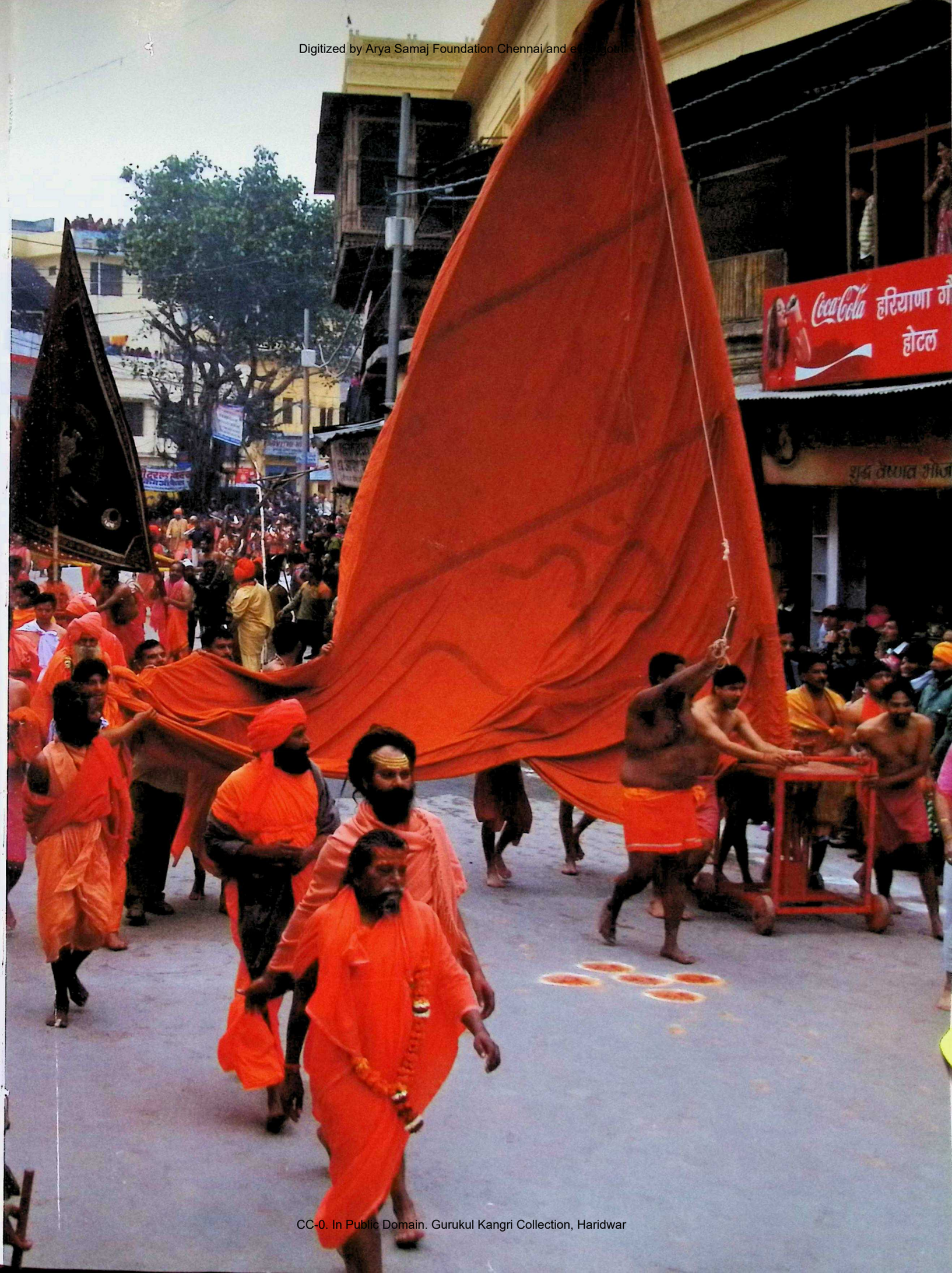

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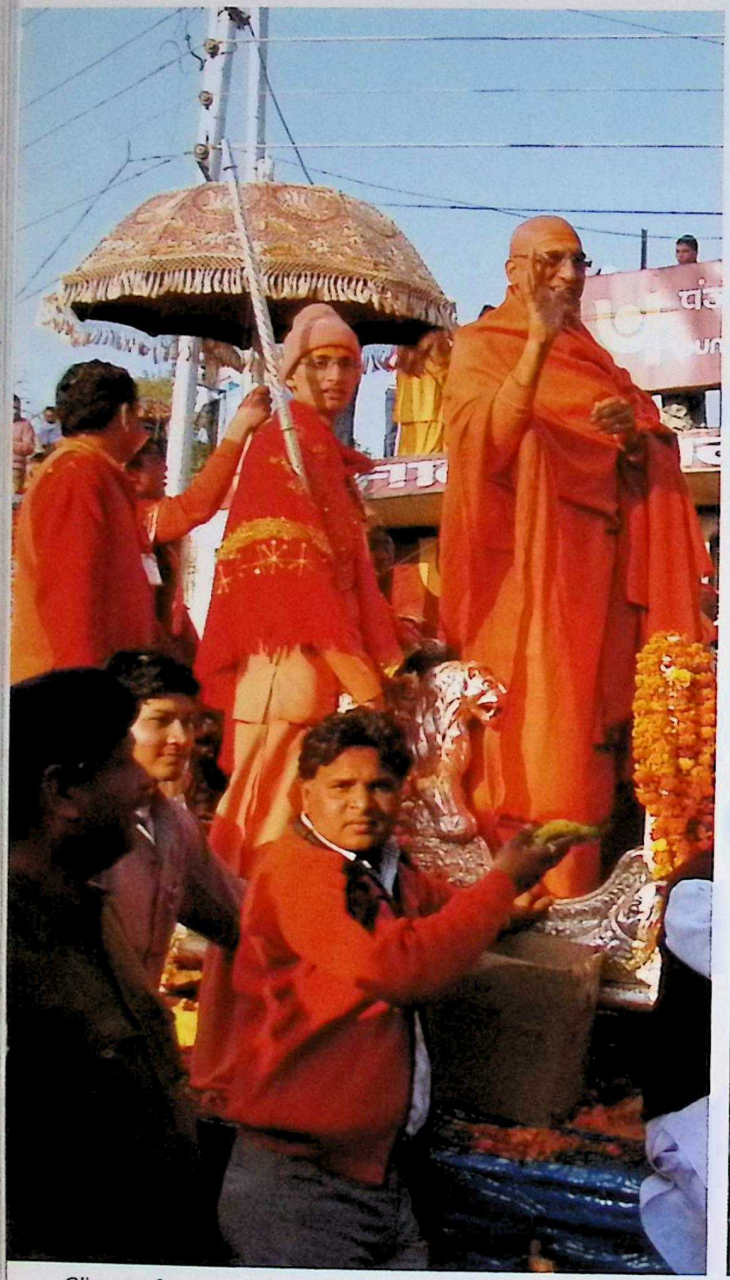

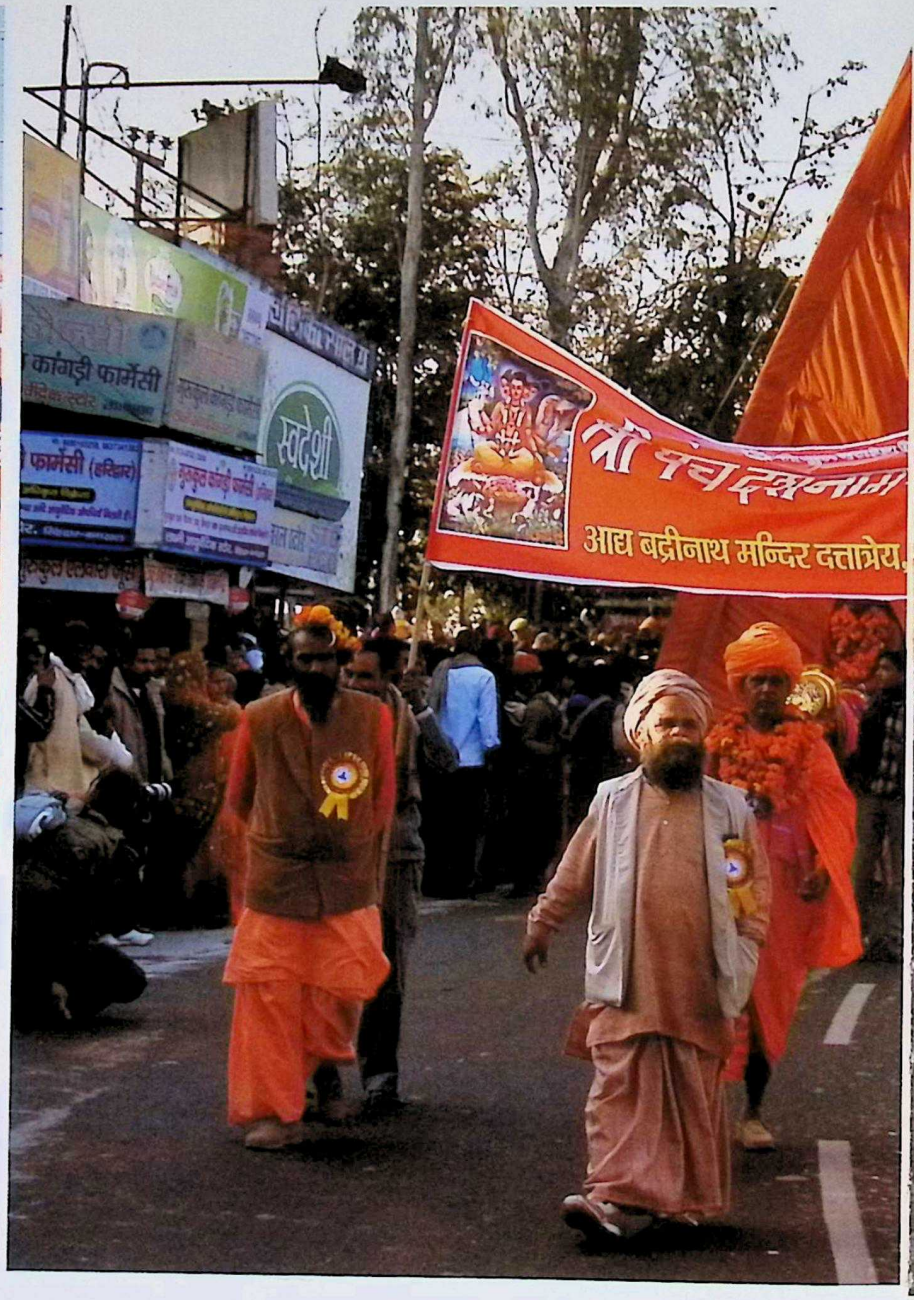

Glimpses of royal processions

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The Processions Begin

The processions of incessant rows of naga sanyasis with ash smeared bodies, bare-bodied, some of the sadhus wearing saffron clothes led by Mahamandaleshwars and sri mahants seated in their golden and thrones atop elephants and chariots had started reaching their chhawanies (camps) in the mela area.

Tradition is that the sadhus of the akharas, coming from all over the country and abroad to take part in the Mahakumbh, stay on the outskirts of the city and they take out grand peshwai (entry procession) on auspicious dates, decided by priests before entering the mela zone.

Juna, Agni and Awahan ranked among top three to occupy the Mahamandaleshwar nagar tent colonies. The camping for these akharas was done at Gaurishankar dweep area. Earth is dug and then plastered with mud to prepare Dhuna sthals (fire places) for these renunciants.

Ochre coloured sadhus swarmed at Mayadevi and Ramleela maidan areas. Charan padukas (sandals) of all three akharas are mounted in these parks. Langars (free kitchen) was served by Juna Bhairav akhara for the incoming sadhus. A part of Ramleela maidan adjacent to the Haridwar main post office had been reserved for female saints of Juna akhara.

The order of the sadhus owes adherence to sage Dattatreya and Jagadguru Shankaracharya pioneers of Nagas group to protect sanatana dharma (traditional Hinduism) and preserve it as a religious faith. Living in society, they follow a dress code but go on their way for taking up the shahi snan. This is their religious birth right.

Peshwai Chronology

Mahanirvani akhara peshwai on Feb 3
Atal akhara peshwai on Februray 5
Niranjani akhara peshwai on Feb 7
Anand akhara peshwai on Feb 9

The First Royal Procession

The main colourful royal march of the Mahakumbh mela was started commanded by religious leaders amidst Hindu rites and rituals. The 'peshwai' (royal entry) of Panchdashnam Juna akhara and Agni akhara was initiated amidst loud slogans, showering of flowers, grand musical bands, cymbals and dedicated recitations of mantra.

Fruit juice cans and sugar candies were distributed by local businessmen and traders in Jwalapur area and Aryanagar chowk to welcome the procession.

Since 'Peshwai' and 'Shahi Snan' (royal bath) of the akharas are the momentous events of Maha Kumbh, these events are led by elephants and horses with full pomp and show. Finally the procession entered the camping venue in Haridwar.

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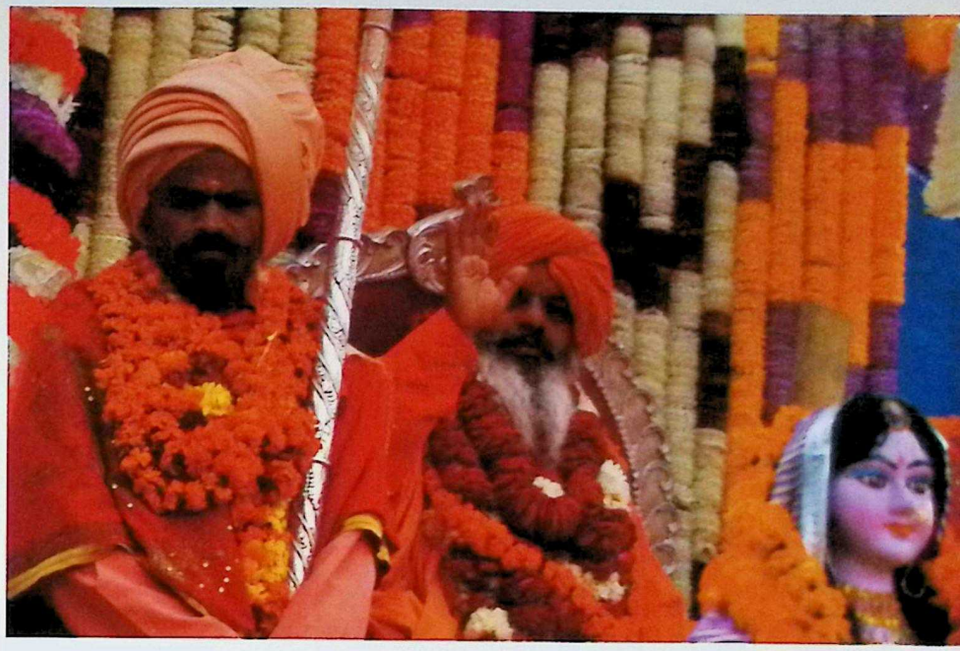

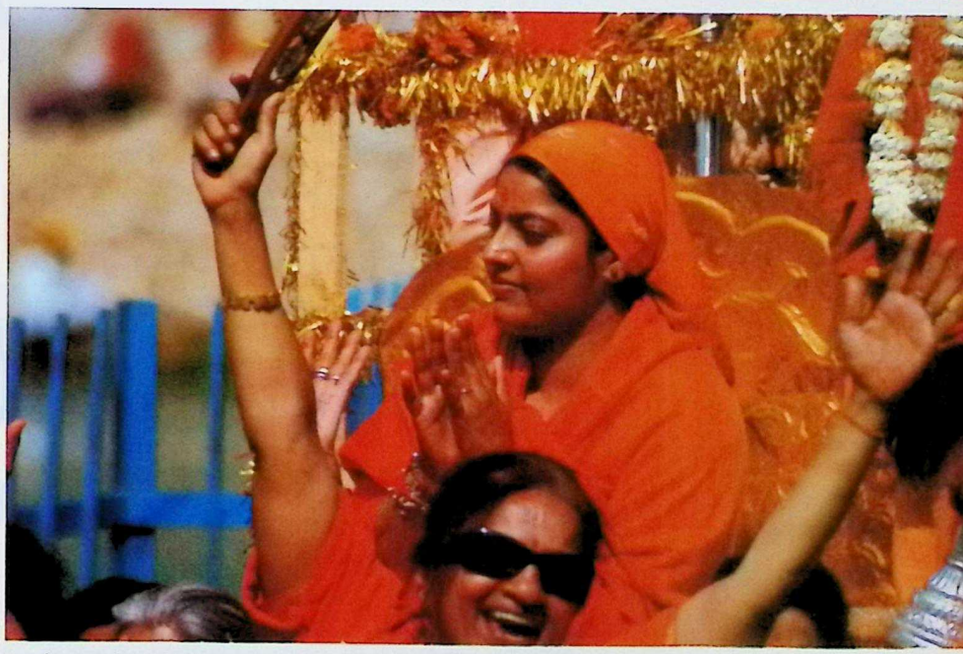

Royal procession of Akharas

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Historical Beginning of Peshwais (processions)

The momentous practice of holy men making entry to the Kumbh in a grand procession was initiated during the reign of King Harshvardhana.

"Naga sadhus of the Juna Akhara have always been welcomed in this royal way since they have renunciated the material comforts so royalties are thrown at their feet as a mark of reverence," said a Naga sadhu (naked hermit).

The Acharya mahamandleshwars and mandaleshwars were seated on silver baghis (chariots) decked with vibrant flowers. Their disciples brandishing lathis (sticks), swords and gadas (mach) followed the chariot in large groups. Some of the saints were also seen seated on elephants, horses and chariots. Over two dozen bands, elephants, stallions and chariots manifest the royal procession. The flag (pataka) or symbol of each akhara led the procession. The chariot of deity was followed by special position holders and saints. The immediate position after this chariot was given to 'Ramta panchs' or the nomadic group of the five saints.

Display of Acrobats Skills and Valour by Naga Sadhus

The procession of akharas witnessed thousands of Naga sadhus displaying their acrobatic and martial skills. The event added colour to the Kumbh Mela. All through the way Uttarakhand patrolling police and horse regiment were leading and making way for procession.

Some of the naga sannyasis marched, waving trishuls, clubs lathis and swords. Their confidence and skills impressed the onlookers. Some talented singers from the group sang bhajans to complement beating of drums, blowing of conches and trumpets.

Ramta panch wing of Juna akhara had stayed at Gughal mandir in Jwalapur for more than a month. Each akhara was a site for celebrations and brimmed with activities. Most of these activities revolved around preparations for the long 'royal' march. Many Muslim community workers used to engage for polishing and decoration of chariots.

Soham baba, a naga sannyasi of Juna Akhara, who visited Haridwar from the Netherlands, drew great attention. His chariot progressed with his foreign bodyguards and disciples. They carried placards to warn the people of the dangers of global warming.

Daati maharaj, the peethadheshwar of Shani temple of Delhi, who belongs to Maha Nirvani akhara, was accompanied by hundreds of his disciples, young men and women. They were wearing black clothes and singing paeans for Shani Dev. They also carried message placards, like "Save the girl child", "Save the Trees".

Feb 7, 2010- Royal Religious Extravaganza

More than thousands thronged the streets of the holy city of Haridwar just to witness novelty of the third Peshwai or 'Jamaat' led by Mahamandaleshwar Vishwadevanand giri of Mahanirvani akhara. The crowds applauded when the floral showering on the mahamandaleshwars, akhara bosses, on silver thrones in the procession from a white airplane above. Children seemed much enchanted by the grand religious affair. The airplane showered three coloured flower petals a number of times in series on the long magnificent procession that stretched a few kilometres. The three colours used were in sync with the tri coloured Indian flag that led the procession.

The third peshwai of Mahanirvani akhara was initiated from Kankhal. , It navigated through Shankarachrya Chowk at Haridwar Delhi national highway and Shivmurti and Rishikul regions under vigilant eyes of security forces.

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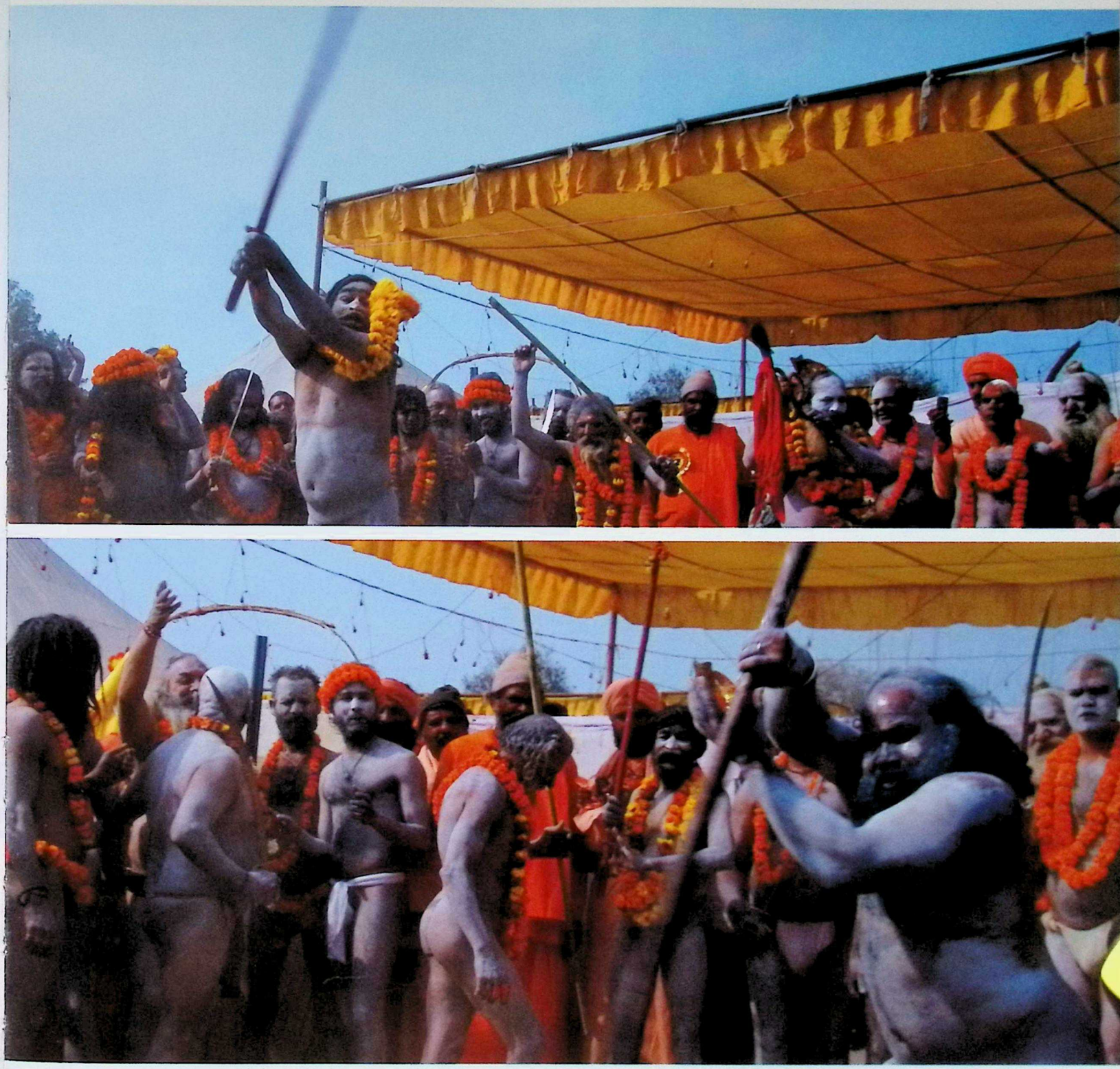

Naga Sadhus carrying lances, tridents and swords symbolizing the hy-thological victory of gods over demons

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Musical bands and colorful performers mark the royal processions

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A Riot of Colours

The floral laurels adorned headgears of the Naga sadhus who came straddling on elephants and horses. Trolleys carrying the idols of deities were bedecked with exquisite orchids of varying colours. Devotees and businessmen gathered in serpentine queues to offer delicacies like kheer (rice pudding), sugar candies, saunf (aniseed) and fruit juices to the procession holders.

The people displayed their happiness by touching the feet of renunciants to seek blessings while children were excited about offering bannanas to the elephants on which strode the Mahamandaleshwars and Mahants. Over 50 young Naga sadhus walked barefoot in the procession. Camel riders were an attraction to the crowd initially but had to stay aloof due to the heavy sound emerging from musical bands that disturbed the camels. Marching sadhus played a variety of wind instruments including conches, nagphanis (snake shaped instrument) to add to the fervor of festivity. Silver tridents flaunted by sadhus shone in the bright rays of mid-day sun.

A dash of colour and enthusiasm were added by professional dancers adorned in traditional Punjabi dress, rich glossy lungis and kurtis dancing their way to the tunes of Punjabi bhangra band. The dance was a thrilling experience to the spectators. Finally, the peshwai concluded at the Mahanirvani Akhara in Kankhal with much fanfare in the afternoon. The peshwai is not about religion. It incorporated rich cultural and social aspects too.

Spectrum of Indian Culture in Kumbh Mela

It was a definitely a vibrant and multi-splendored extravaganza, displaying entire spectrum of the Indian culture, folklore arts, vernacular traditions and the theory of unity in diversity. Bhangra of Punjab was in full swing on one side and on the other glimpses of traditional folk dances from Haryana, West Bengal, Manipur, Kerala and other states entertained the crowd.

For the first time, a pageant of the Doli of Nanda Devi Raj ghat, the most famous yatra of Uttarakhand, also took part in the peshwai. It was the Peshwais that lend a royal touch to the entire Kumbh affair.

Since Kumbh peshwais are known to be the softest target, a trial drill was effectively carried out by security personnel a day before, including big honchos scrutinizing the preparations. The glitches were also evident– while public address systems boomed out the need for passes to allow foreign tourists to take photographs, the mela officials scoffed at any such rule.

Sadhus Express Concern on Environment

The arrival of saints was in full swing. Some mendicants were spotted conveying words of wisdom to the explorers. These ash smeared Naga sadhus, who live in mountain retreats away from the hustle bustle of this world, are not ignorant of burning issues of mankind such as environmental pollution and global warming.

"Naga babas are very much concerned about the paryavaran problems confronting the whole world and India is no way behind. Free will to do anything without considering others and environment is the major causes of the problems of today. Unmattata aur swarthata (unchecked free will and selfishness) have become the order of day. Only self-restraint and thinking for others can solve the global environmental problems of today," said Naga Swami Divyanand of Ramta Panch Juna Akhara.

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Soham Baba from Netherlands in his royal décor made of white gold during the procession

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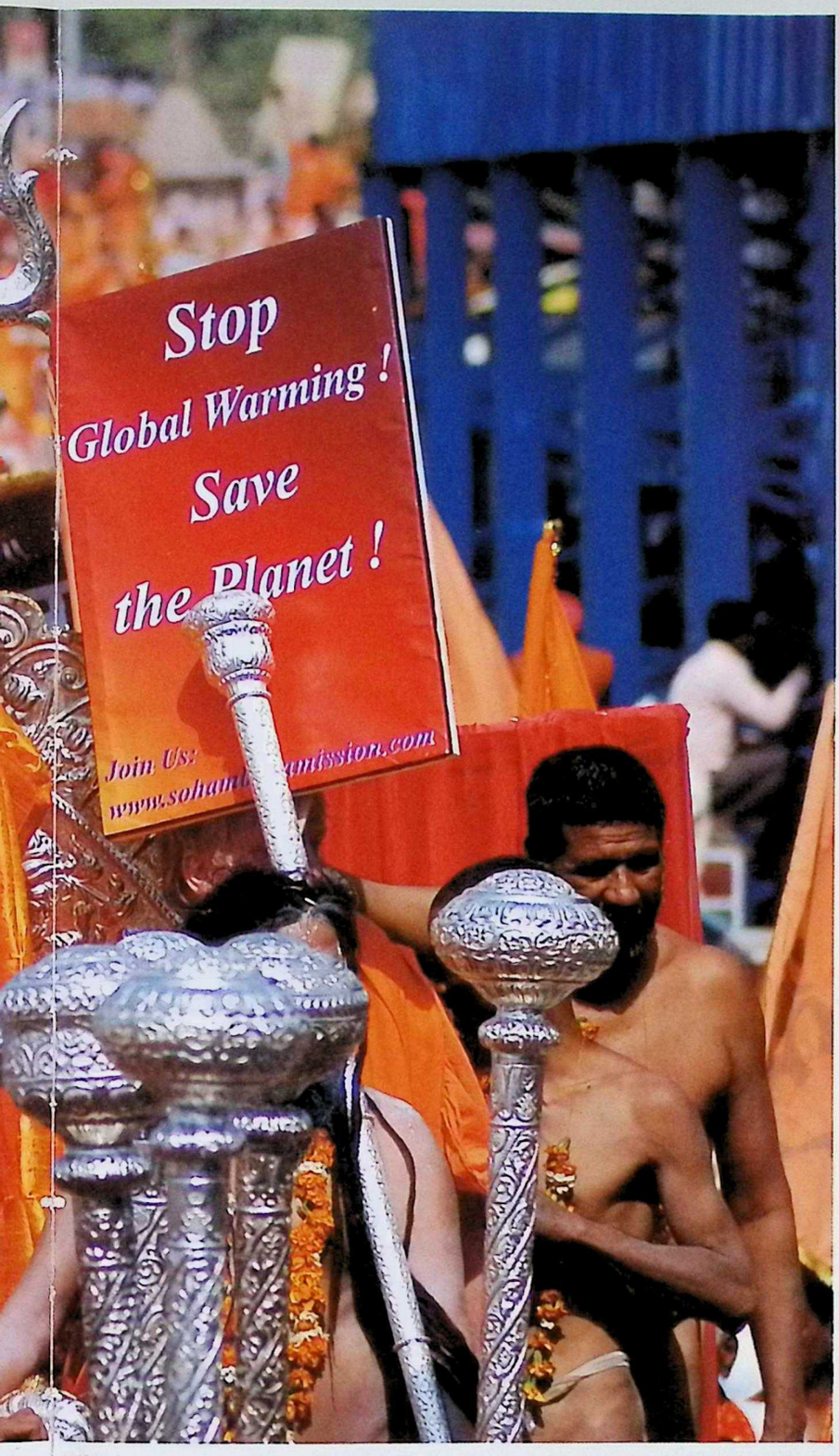

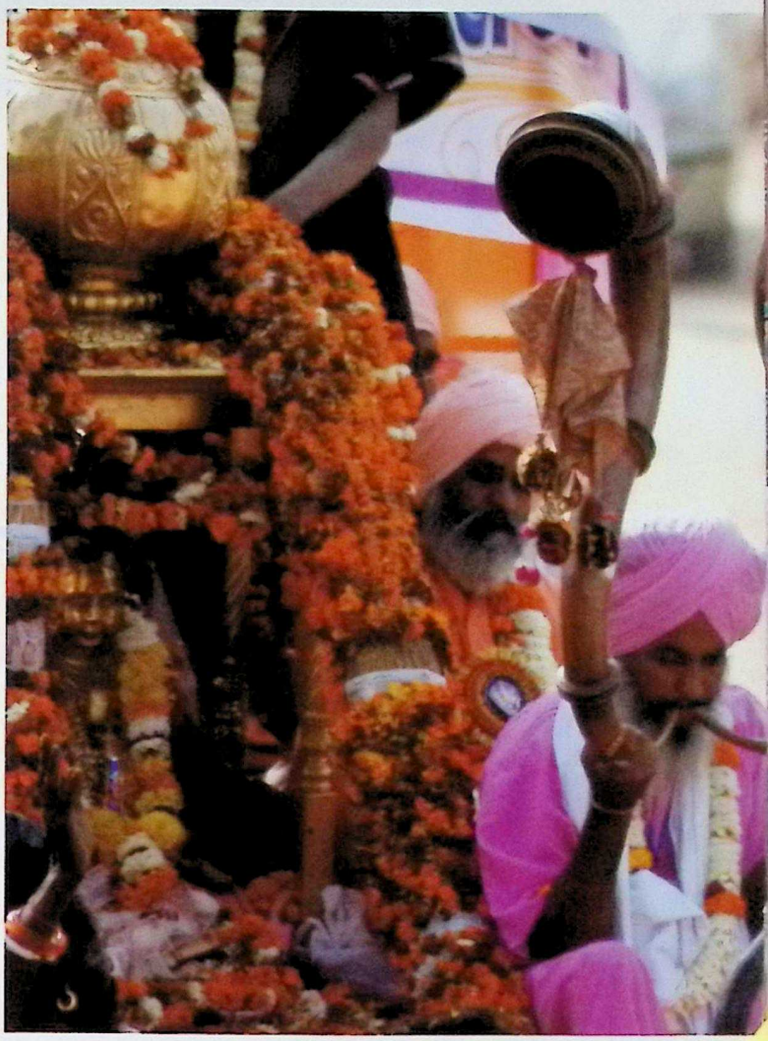

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Dharma Dhvajas (staffs of renunciation)

Traditionally, in Hindu temples, the flag staff freestanding on the sanctum sanctorum had religious symbols carved on four sides over which the flag is hoisted. During maha Kumbh, each Akhara with its distinct flag staff (dharma dhwaja) marched in the procession and the flag was kept hoisting outside their deras (camps) too. Kumbh mela administration had arranged much in advance for the flag staffs from Badkot range of forest in Doiwala.

Dhwaja is the Sanskrit word for flag and symbolic of the owner's victory over ego and having acquired control over the baser nature under the guidance of the Supreme being. Each of the akharas has its own unique symbol and design engraved on the dhwaja (flag).

The Kumbh mela administration faced a trial ahead to expedite the movement of these 52 yards long tree trunks to their respective Mahants of akharas. Most of the akharas lodged on Sannyas road of Kankhal that accommodated narrow and curving streets. To make the situation worse, electricity poles, wires and old multi -storeyed houses acted as barricades to the movement of long staffs.

Selection of Flag Staffs

Sadhus from different akharas had chosen these flag staffs in the forest assisted by forest officials. These axed perfectly to perform a grand ritual. Only tall and strong trees are fit to become the staffs of renunciation. The Sub mela offcer (kumbh) Harveer Singh shouldered the charge to make provisions for the delivery of these staffs to their respective akharas.

It is definitely a herculean task to load heavy dharma dhwajas on truck following certain specifications. These flag staffs cannot be tilted and must be transported only in standing position. Kumbh Mela Adhikari, Anand Bardhan was successful in accomplishing this task on time.

Shankaracharyan Intellect

These Shankaracharyas belong to the Adi Shankara lineage who was highly renowned for his revival of the knowledge of Vedic Sanatan Dharma as per the Vedic scriptures. He established four major monasteries in India. The monasteries or 'matths' are located in the North, South, East and Western parts of India. These matths or 'peeths' (monasteries) were overseen by Shankaracharyas as per the precise tradition and protocols prescribed by Adi Shankara.

During ancient times, Jagadguru Shankaracharyas had been visiting the Kumbh mela in Haridwar but strictly avoided peshwais (royal processions). They are held much higher in intellect and mystical wisdom as compared to the akhara sadhus. However, in the recent kumbh melas, Jagadguru Shankaracharya Vasudevanand Saraswati and Shankaracharya Swarupanand Saraswati had reportedly participated in peshwais going for the holy dip.

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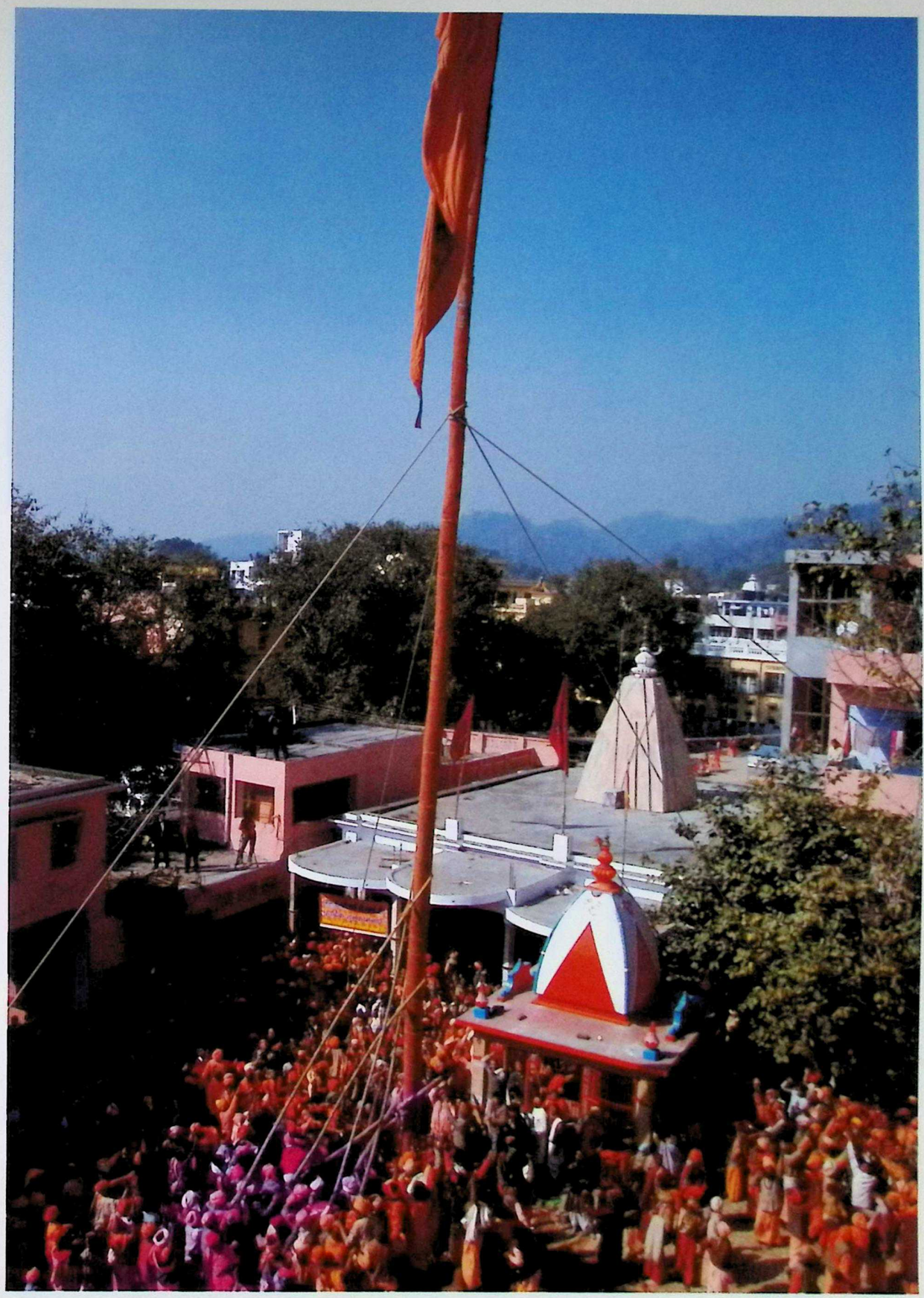

It is a herculean task to raise 52ft high wooden staff which bears insignia of akhara.

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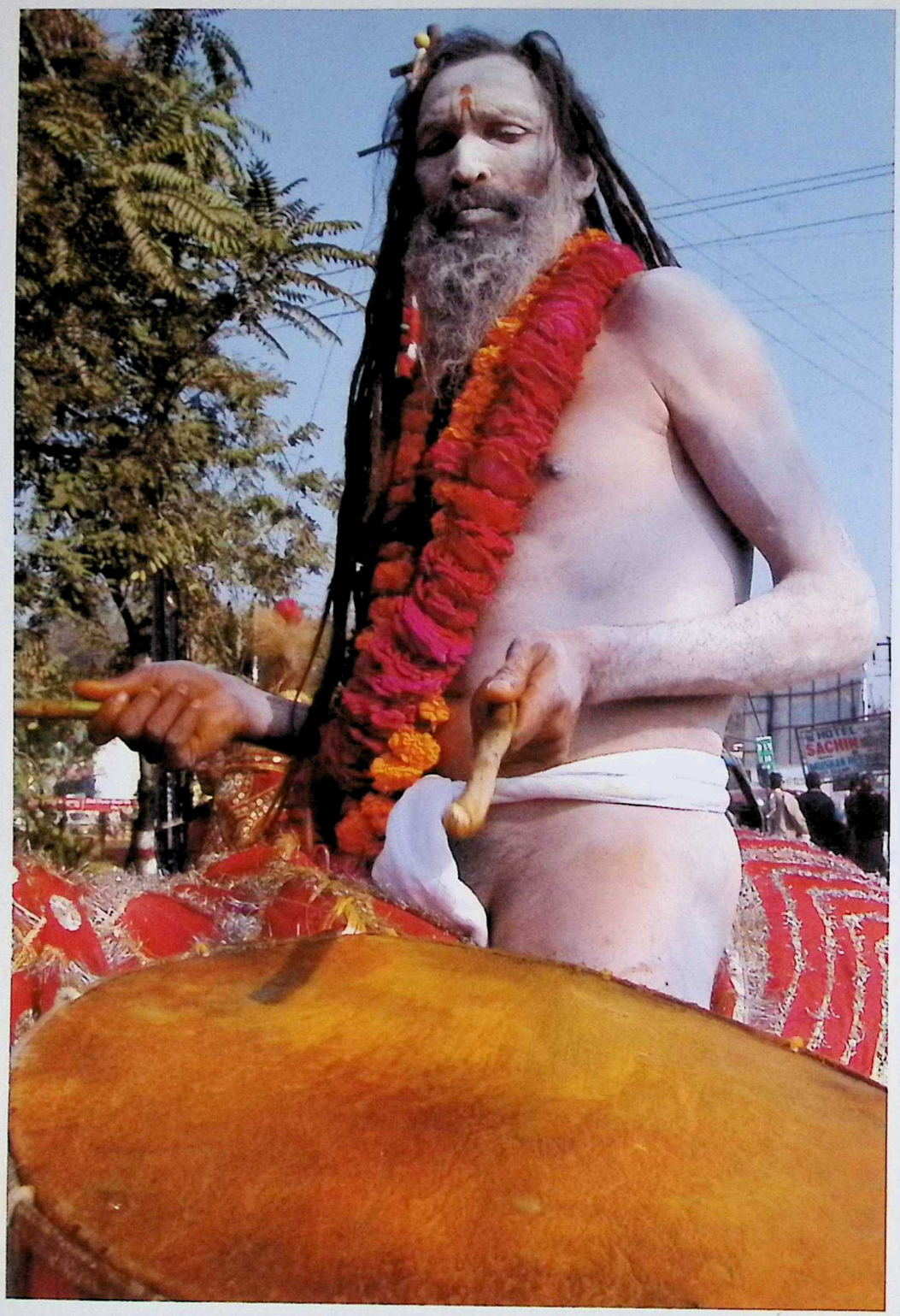

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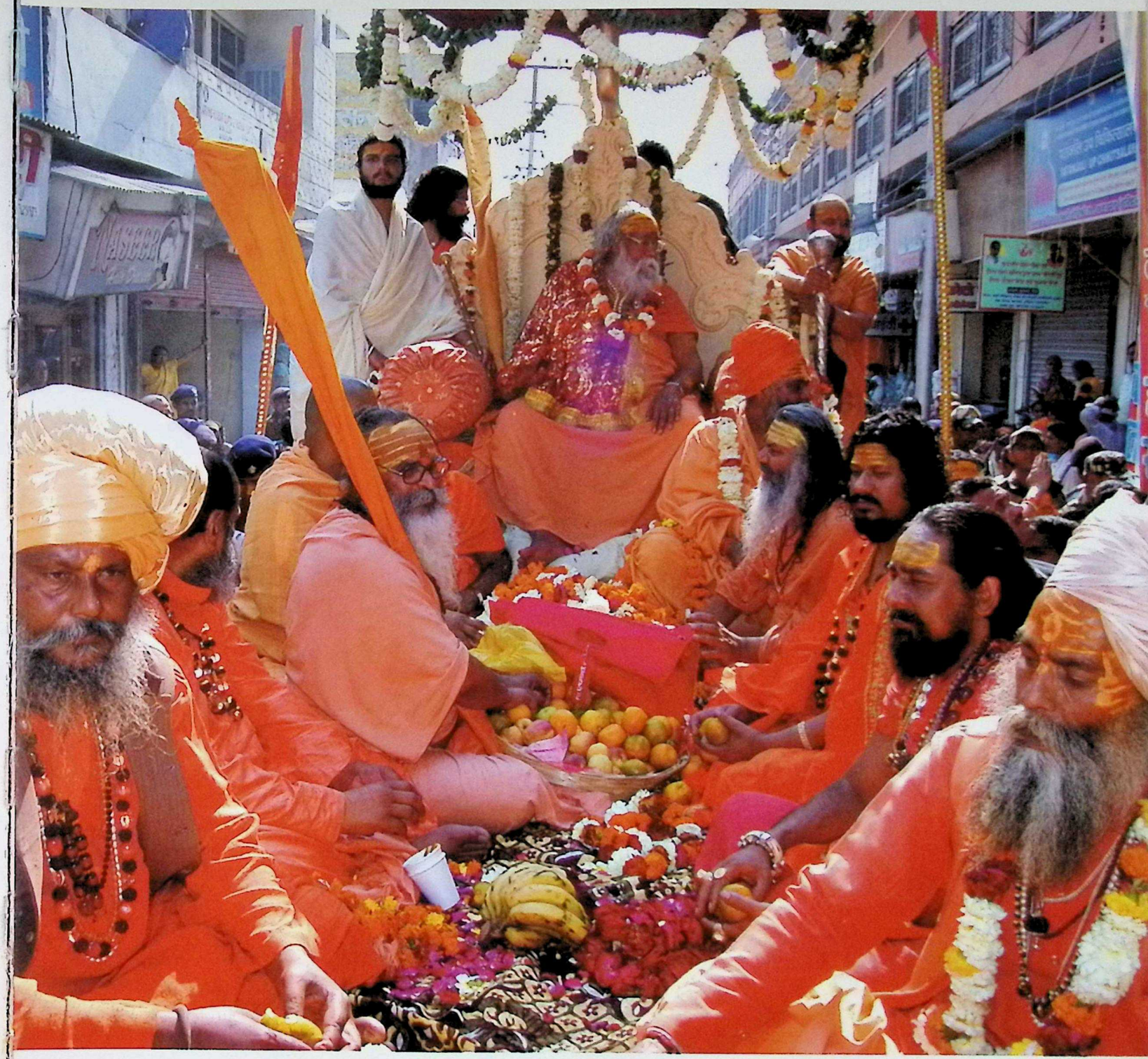

Shankaracharya, during the royal procession distributing sacred food.

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Feb 12, 2010

The big sadhu brigades paraded for the February 12 holy dip - the first 'shahi snan'. It is considered by holy men as the 'real' take-off point of the Mahakumbh.

Centuries Old Tradition Broken by Akharas

India is recognized widely for its aptitude for preserving ancient traditions. However, it a historical event took place on the first shahi snan (royal bath) of the Mahakumbh mela of the third millennium, when the centuries old tradition was broken. Till date, the first shahi snan was reserved only for 7 sannyasi akharas. But this time, in a undisputed move, councils from Bairagi, Udasin and Nirmal akharas were also allowed to have the royal bath on the first day. Akhara parishad chief had given consent to consider the last snan of the 3 akharas as 'Shahi' and invited them to join in the first royal bath.

The common pilgrims could access the 'Har Ki pauri' area only in the morning hours till 8:00 a.m. IST after which the ghats were cleaned and sealed for akhara sadhus. According to the sources, 10 lakh (1 million) pilgrims had taken the holy dip on the auspicious day of Mahashivaratri and shahi snan. At 10.45 a.m. IST, the sadhus of Juna, Agni and Awahan reached the Brahmkund 'Har Ki Pauri' area in a 'shahi' procession with 'nagas' displaying their prowess with swords and silver sticks.

Holy Dip Accomplished

The Ganga temple that stands tall at Brahmkund in 'Har Ki Pauri', was fully adorned to welcome the renunciants. It was indeed a sight to feast one's eyes on as they removed their only covering on their heads and loins, the floral wreaths and garlands made of marigold flowers and threw them on the pirouetting waves of Ganga. Brahmkund was flooded with ash and flowers for a couple of seconds and slogans of 'Har Har Mahadev' echoed through the air and enveloped the whole of 'Har Ki Pauri'. It is believed that just as the dip in the Brahmkund on the auspicious day paves a sure path to salvation and one can absolve one's sins completely, by following the snan of these renunciants, as even the river Ganges becomes pure.

The devotees hung on to have dip in the waters made holy after the renunciants had taken bath. It is their day, the sadhus day, and no one else can come in their way. Till 2.30 IST, Juna, Agni, Awahan, Niranjani and Atal had taken the shahi snan and returned to their respective colonies affably. The shahi snan ritual went on till 7.00 p.m. IST in the evening. They were driven by an unwavering faith and sought to fulfill their ultimate desire to take a dip in the Ganges that assumes nectareal powers during this time.

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The head priests instructing the followers before a royal bath

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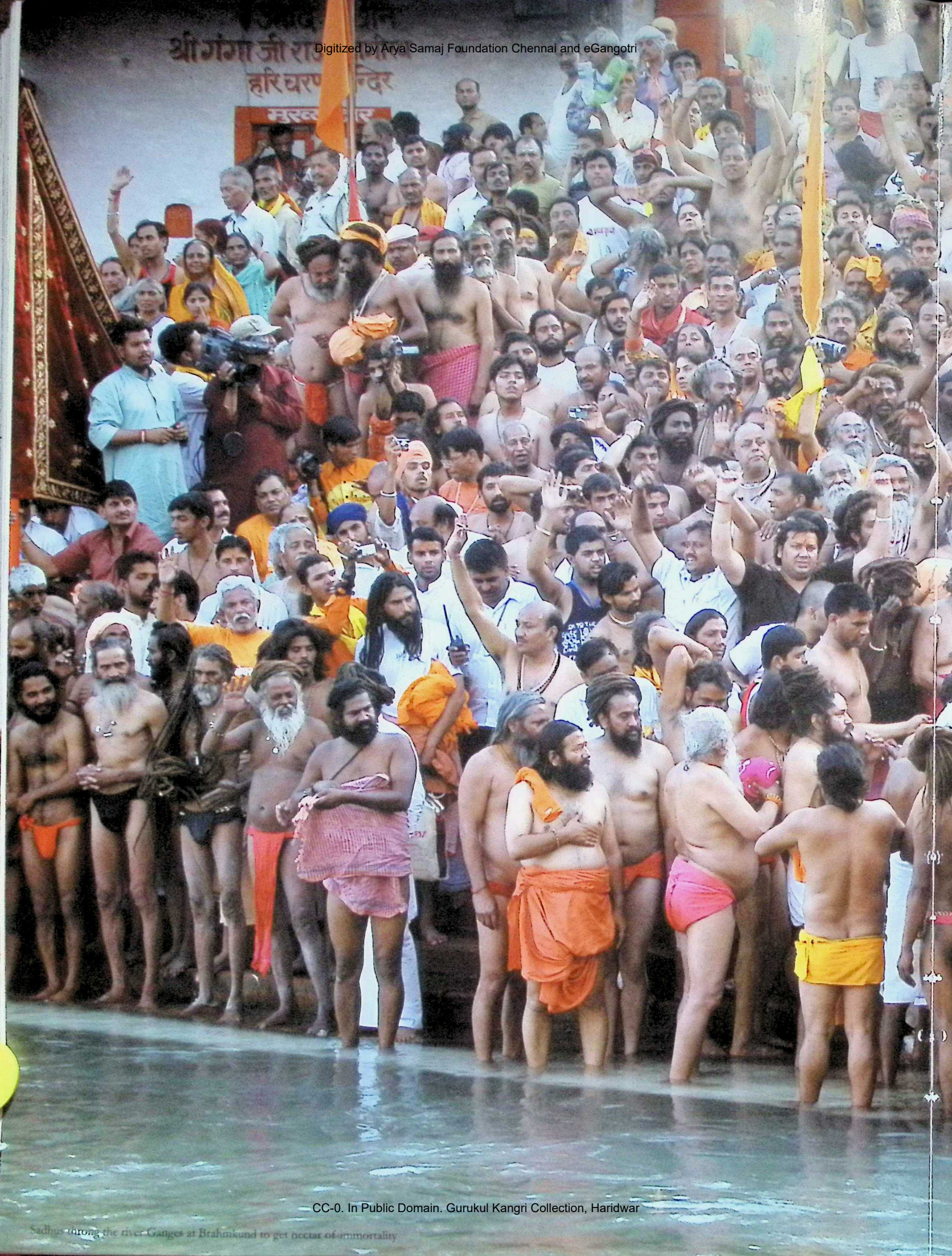

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Sadhus throng the river Ganges at Brahmkund to get nectar of immortality

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Tradition weds Technology

The Peshwais and akharas were busy displaying their talent one after the other! Babas atop elephant backs in chariots, nagas beating drums and velvetty flags with akhara emblem were soothing to eyes. It was a usual affair at the maha kumbh mela. However, the main feature that rendered exclusivity to the entire event was the fourth peshwai taken out on February 5. It was a traditional yet hi-tech affair!

The fourth peshwai of Atal Akhara and Sri Shambhu Panchayati Akhara began from Swarupanand Ashram old shiva temple navigating from Jatwara bridge of Jwalapur parading past the Gurukul Kangri Vishwavidyalaya and kankhal region. It concluded amidst musical bands and devout extravaganza at Kankhal in Atal Akhara. The most striking part was white skinned devotees clad in cream coloured silk kurtas and dhotis holding banners showing weblink www.swamiji.tv on the banners and flags.

They joined nagas walking barefoot and shouting slogans of 'har har mahadev', Mahamandaleshwars distributing prashad touched by their hands to the spectators gathered on every little place along the sides of the roads. Silver sticks shone under the bright sun and so were the silk draperies of the followers.

Peshwai with Online Links on Banners

The Peshwais added to the glory of internet protocols that allow only small domain names to be registered. The banner bore signs and links for Sri Panchayati mahanirvani akhara, Vishwaguru Mahamandaleshwar and Shri Shri 1008 Paramahansa Swami Maheshwaranand Puri ji maharaj of Shri Alakhpuriji Sidh parampara Rajasthan and carried by foreign women devotees. Other akharas also supported and marched with the main akhara peshwai.

The titles 108 and 1008 are confined to different mahamandaleshwars. 'Mahamandaleshwar' is a title used by some Hindu monks of the Dashanami order of renunciates founded by Shankaracharya. One who is blessed with the title 'Mahamandaleshwar' has been elevated by his peers to the highest level of traditional Hindu spiritual guardianship. In the present day, India has over hundred Mahamandaleshwars who work for a cause initiated by Shankaracharya almost 1,200 years ago. Literally, 'Mahamandaleshwar' means 'Superior of great and numerous monasteries'. Splitting the word 'Maha' means great, 'mandala' means district and 'ishwara' is the head sovereign.

Sunday Peshwai

The Niranjani Akhara Peshwai of February 7 is definitely the 'Sunday Peshwai' that witnessed the conglomeration of Shankaracharyas, 26 Mahamandaleshwars including woman Mahamandaleshwar, groups of students, householders, jugglers, masquerades and stage artists in the ostensibly endless procession. The students exploited their Sunday, joining the procession, holding social messages.

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Above: Former Shankaracharya and founder of Bharat Mata Mandir, Swami Satyamitranand in procession during Kumbh Mela 2010

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Led by former Shankaracharya Swami Satyamitrananda of legendary Bharat mata mandir and Mahamandaleshwar Punyanand Giri, students of Satyamitranand Giri inter college, Hari pur kalan participated in the procession holding billboards with social messages to save environment and country.

'Respect the 3-G's 'Gau, Gita and Ganga' (cow, scripture Bhagavad Gita and river Ganga) was the message carried by the students and the devotees who joined the procession. In order save one's country, saving trees and Ganga was necessary. This was the common message conveyed through banners reading 'Bharat mata sabki mata' (Mother India is everyone's mother) and 'ek vriksha sau putron saman' (a tree equates 100 sons). Amidst mantra recitations by teenager brahmacharis of Bharat mata mandir, slogans like 'jab tak ganga aviral hai, tab tak desh prabal hai' echoed the whole procession. (The country's strength lies in unceasing flow of Ganga.)

Commercialism at Kumbh Processions

The usual prime candidates of the peshwai were Naga sadhus followed by chariots of Mahamandaleshwars mounted on trolleys, interposed with musical band groups and prestidigitators who played with fire rings to fascinate the crowds. The actors dressed exquisitely in the garbs of mythological characters such as Narada muni, Radha Krishna, Lord Shiva. These actors were definitely the highlights of the procession.

'Marketing Prevails' was the well sent memorandum by the boy artists who painted the address and mobile number of their art group on bare backs. The musical numbers being played by the band groups had Indian religious themes but the dancing steps of the artists flawlessly amalgamated the jerks and twists of the western pop singer Michael Jackson!

The pageant of Mahamandaleshwar 1008 Santoshi Mata had many volunteers from Santoshi mata charitable hospital walking with message against female feticide written clearly on their banners and placards, 'Bhroon hatya roko' (stop female feticide). It is noteworthy that Mahamdaleshwar Santoshi mata is the senior most women Mahamandaleshwars of the city.

Navigating through the Dadu bag and other Kankhal regions of the city, the peshwai concluded in the afternoon at chhawani of Niranjani akhara where grand feasts were organized by Srimahants.

Second Innings of the Peshwais

During March month the city again geared up to watch the inauguration of another royal show in the holy city! All seven sannyasi akharas had reached their pre-destined chhavanis prior to the first shahi snan (royal bath) scheduled on auspicious day of Shivaratri. They were accompanied by big bang peshwais.

The second royal bath took place in March. It was second innings of peshwais by rest of the six akharas. Three bairagi akharas conjointly partook for the first time in the grand parade of elephants, musical bands, acrobatic nagas and chariots.

Before the opening of the royal march, flagstaff (dharma dhvaja) investiture was held on Mar 7 by Digamber Ani, Nirmohi Ani and Nirvani Akhara.

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Exhibits amidst the royal processions

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Carrying the akhara deity with royal extravaganza for royal dip

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Dharam Dhvaja Enthronement and Peshwai Calendar

10th Mar Bara akhara dharma dhvaja ceremony, followed by peshwai on 11thMar.
12th Mar Naya akhara dharma dhvaj ceremony, followed by peshwai on 13thMar.
14th Mar Nirmal Akhara peshwai, followed by dharma dhvaja ceremony on 15thMar.
Nirmal akhara followed a unique ritual of flag staff ceremony after carrying out peshwai.

Sumeru peeth Shankaracharya Narendra Giri along with Vasudevanand followed the royal procession on March 15 for shahi snan. Swarupanand escorted the Agni akhara peshwai.

It seemed all roads lead to Haridwar during the Mahakumbh mela. The pleasing weather, long weekend, festivities at Kumbh galore and live telecasts by channels had all elicited the wave of pilgrimage at Haridwar. One had to walk one way to get the amrit (holy dip) at famous Har Ki Pauri. All means of transportation were barred to enter the holy city in the mela zone area. All route diversions had been implemented a day before to avoid confusions. After 760 years, Mahakumbh and Somvai amavasya coincided to mark it a special day. The planetary union of Surya (sun), Chandrama (moon) and Guru (Brihaspat) mark the Haridwar Kumbh festival.

The inflow of devotees was on a steady rise just two days ahead of Somvati Amavasya snan. Interestingly, around half a million had arrived a day before. With luggage in hands and on head, majority of the pilgrims did not mind walking from the temporary busstands in Dheerwali near BHEL foundary gate, Chandi Devi police chowki, Dakshdweep and Shantikunj area. Around two thousand buses were booked for these special snans from different states of India and twelve special trains including shuttle trains betweenRishikesh and Jwalapur were started. It was a boom time for rickshaw pullers and peddle trolleys who offered a helping hand to tourists and transported them to their destinations.

Ganga gets Pious

Many pilgrims, in lakhs, had taken the auspicious holy dip at Har Ki Pauri in the wee hours of the morning. The ritual started early at 4 am and went on till 8.30 am. The day time was chartered for shahi snan by 13 akharas in fixed slots. Many waited till afternoon when most of the akhara saints had taken the dip. They had a reason behind this. According to a popular belief, the saints and renunciants who have been practising in Himalayan caves and cliffs visit Kumbh to share virtues earned by practicing austerities. The Ganga gets pious after the royal bath taken by saints.

The entire city was under vigilant cover of security personnel. The mela police did their best to encourage smooth running of Kumbh events. The following day was stipulated for 'Nav Samvatsar snan', which marked the beginning of New Year as per the Hindu calendar.

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Raising of dharma dhvaja (religious flag of renunciation) by different akharas at their campus

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Community bathing spectacle

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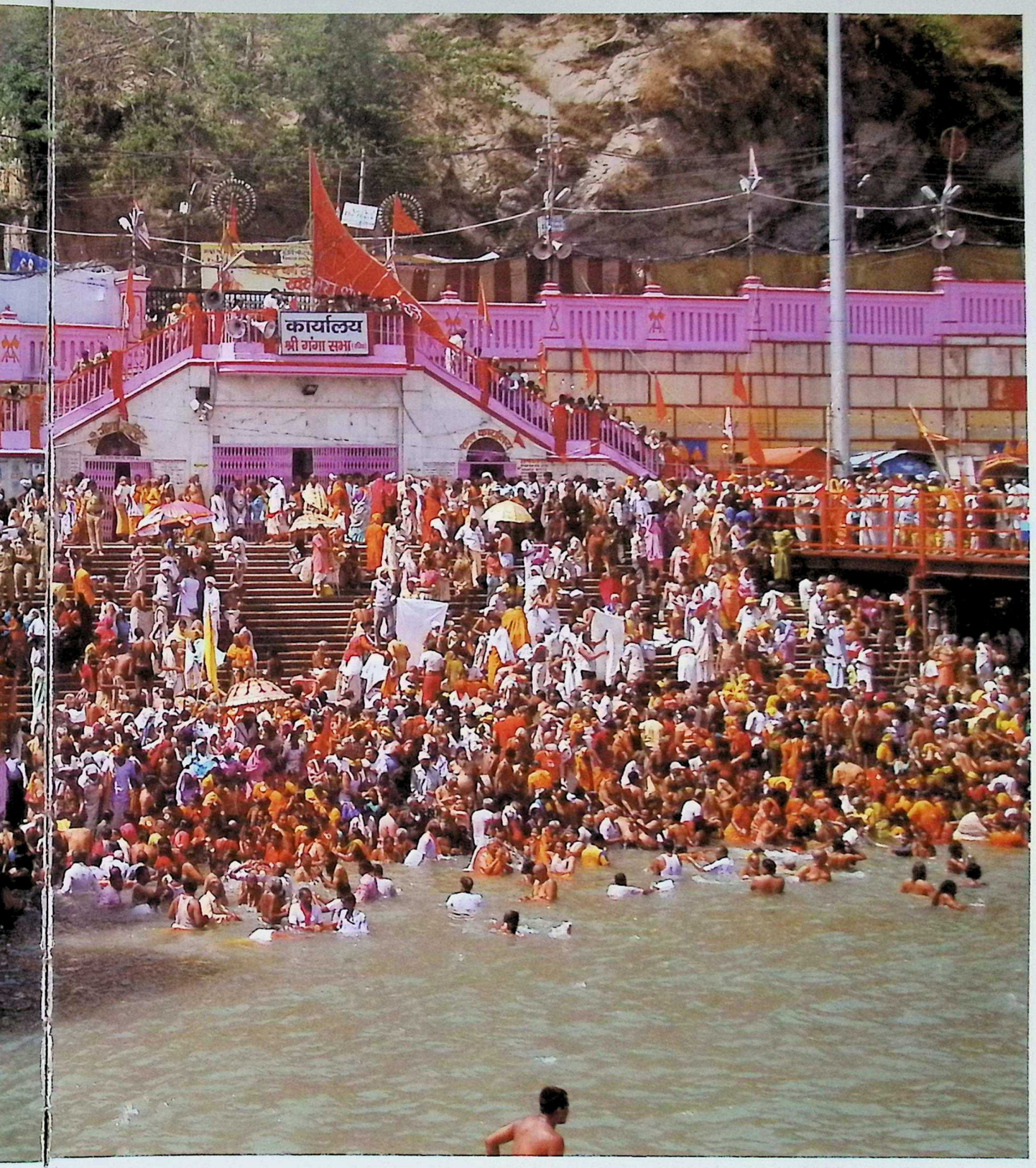

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Shahi Snan at the Sanctum Sanctorum

Mahamandaleshwars of Niranjani akhara and Anand akhara, twenty six in number initiated the shahi snan at 01:10. The naga sadhus followed. Rambling through the shahi procession for snan that started at 9.30 in the morning were 'akhara devta' in grand palaki (palanquin) followed by display of magnificent warfare equipment of Nagas such as trishul, bhala, barcha, swords and many others.

Soon after dipping in the Ganga waters at Brahm kund for 2 minutes and taking holy dip, the Nagas walked out with their deities. They were followed by other devotees at scheduled time. The other akharas Juna- Awahan, Mahaniravani, Bairagi, Bada Akhara, Naya Akhara and Nirmala concluded the rituals in the evening after 6 pm. The ghat was properly cleaned and purified before each akhara took bath.

Sanctum Sanctorum Privileged for Akharas

The akharas enjoyed the privilege to bathe at Brahm kund reserved for them whereas other ghats were open for general public. None of the administrating official or security personnel was allowed in the Brahm kund premises during the ritual of shahi snan. The entire affair was effectively managed by Haridwar Ganga Sabha. The akhara sadhus indulged in the royal bath with complete discipline.

Somvati Amavasya and Navsamvatsar snans were the two major back to back snans that offered a feeling of completeness to the masses. Nearly 50 lakhs (5 million) pilgrims took holy dip on Somvati Amavasya and more than 10 lakhs (1 million) joined in for Nav samvatsar snan. Somvati Amavasya (dark moon on Monday) occurring after 760 years during Kumbh mela. It was another unique happy instance.

It was a wonderful day for sadhus and devotees as the sixth snan, Somvati amavasya and second shahi snan all coincided with another significance attached to it. The coincidence was remarkable because all the 13 akharas, including 7 Shaiva akharas of the sanyasis, the 3 Vaishnav akharas of Bairagi sect, the 2 akharas of Udasins and 1 akhara of Nirmals, took part in the shahi snan. The akharas took snan in the order of their precedence.

Month of March Envisioned Twin Shahi Snans

The akhara parishad applauded the decision of another shahi snan getting the royal status soon after being added to the list of preceding 3 shahi snans (royal baths). Starting from February 12 on Mahashivaratri, the other two declared earlier were of March 15 and April 14. The Kumbh mela administration agreed to the proposal given by Akhara Parishad and declared March 30 snan, as the shahi snan in a recent meeting held in Haridwar Development authority auditorium.

All 13 akharas joined in the royal snan. The Kumbh mela administration provided the requisite infrastructural and security arrangements. Many vasihnav akharas who were away from Haridwar for a month long Kumbh in Vrindavan also joined in. Such a peaceable conduct of fair by the sadhus and administration with protracted royal baths shall remain etched for years and decades to come in the future.

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Magnificent sages and and their displays during a royal bath

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चतुरः कुम्भाश्चतुर्धा ददामि क्षीरेण पूर्णा उदकेनदध्ना
एतास्त्वा धारा उप यन्तु सर्वाः स्वर्गे लोके मधुमत् पन्वमाना
उप त्वा तिष्ठन्तु पुष्करिणीः समन्ताः

"FULL OF THE DIVINE MILK AND OTHER HEAVENLY ITEMS I HAVE ESTABLISHED
FOUR KUMBHAS IN THE FOUR DIRECTIONS, AT FOUR DIFFERENT PLACES.
LET THIS FLOW OF HEAVENLY MILK, MIXED WITH OTHER DIVINE ELEMENTS WHICH PROMISE
THE FRUIT OF GOOD DEEDS, BE AVAILABLE TO YOU AND FILL YOU WITH ITS
SWEETNESS AND GUIDE YOU TO THE PATH OF
PROSPERITY, BEAUTY, GRACE AND FULFILLMENT."

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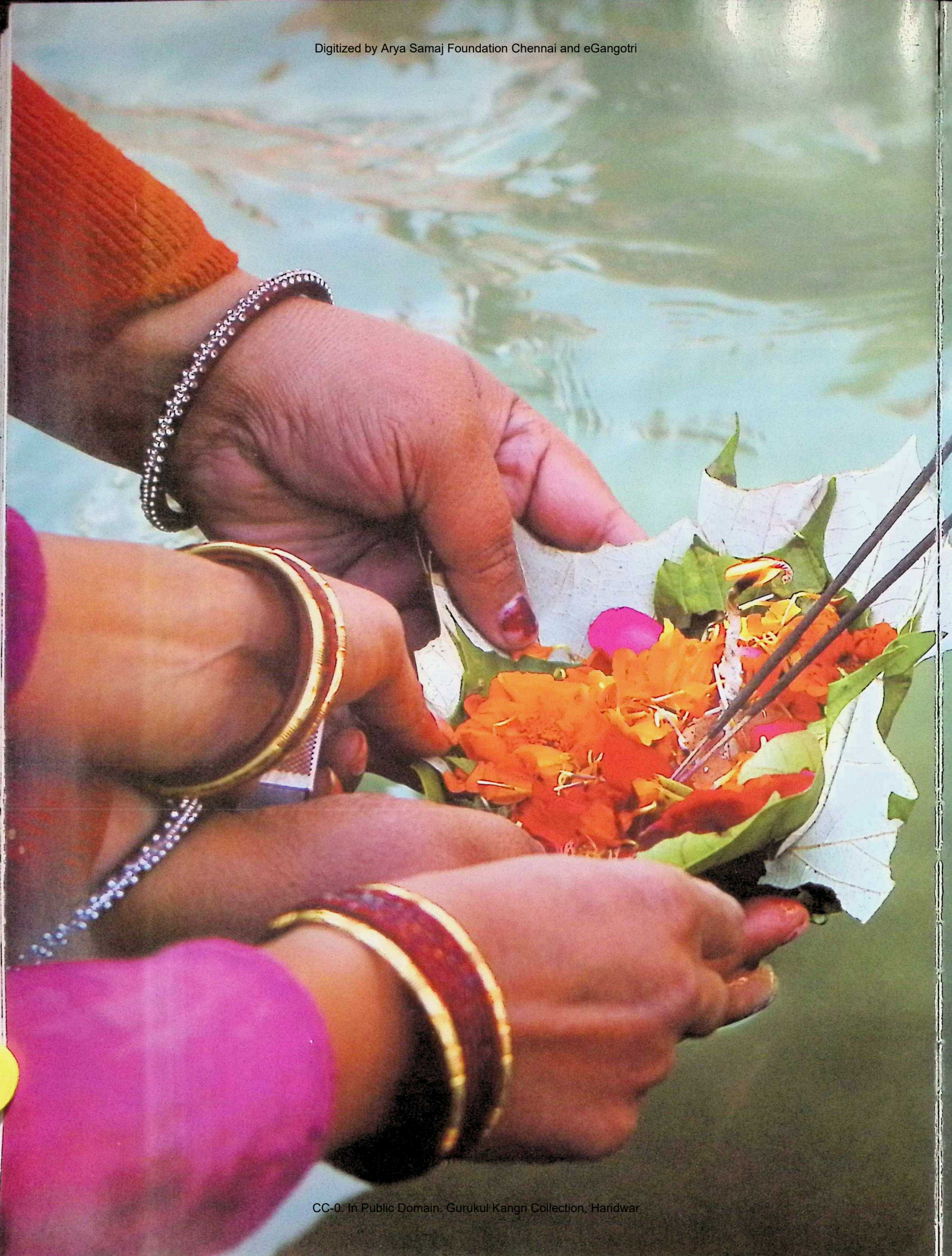

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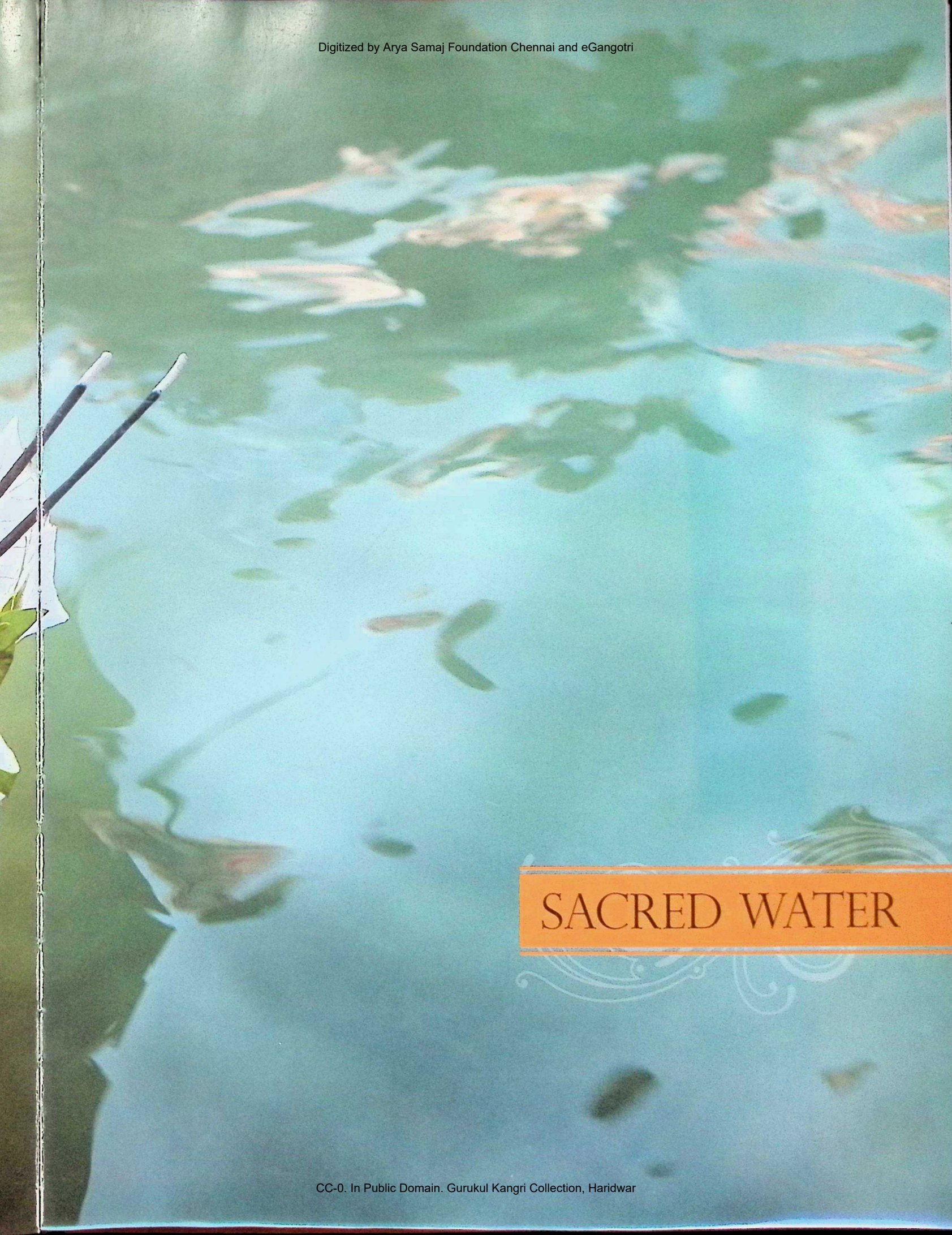

SACRED WATER

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Holy Dip during Kumbh Mela

The water of Ganges is held in high regard by practitioners of Hinduism. Each drop of water is precious and considered a dynamic source of cleansing power and spirituality. Bathing is definitely a ritualized and sacred act, especially when done in this holy river. The Ganga is personified as female goddesses. It is believed that the goddess of the Ganges rides her crocodile around in the water. It is the ultimate goal of all Hindus to bathe in this river at least once in their life. This helps in freeing them from their sins. The Ganges River is a significant cultural aspect to the Hindu population. More than millions of Hindus travel to Kumbh mela just to bathe in the Ganga, believing their sins will be washed away and they will achieve salvation.

Not only the Kumbh mela is significant on account of the concepts of liberation, it also plays an important role in the field of spirituality and national integration. This massive gathering is due to pilgrims from all walks of life travel to this place to attend this Mela. It is a time when millions of pilgrims gather to associate with sadhus, saints, and spiritual teachers from various traditions who attend the Mela. It is also the time when the power of the sacred river, the Ganges, is at its peak. Such activities as associating with the saints, residing in tents practicing austerities, and bathing in the sacred rivers are on the agenda of most everyone who attends the Kumbha mela. There has been an old tradition of mass bathing at Kumbh mela at 'Har Ki Pauri' as it is believed to the pitcher of immortality.

Astronomical View of Kumbh mela

Hindu religious scriptures narrate stories of Gods and Demons attempting to search for the nectar vested at the bottom of ocean to conquer mortality. Kumbh occurs when Jupiter, a mentor of Hindu Gods in heaven, moves into one of the zodiac sign of Aries, Taurus, Leo and Scorpio. Astronomical calculations of planetary orbits show the planet Jupiter, (Brahaspati) cycling into Aries. It is the time when the Sun and the Moon are present in the sign of Capricorn. There is a complete astronomical rotation of the Kumbh planet after every one hundred forty four years. Since there are twelve zodiacal signs and a day is divided into two sets of twelve planetary hours, the Kumbh enjoys a period of twelve years and Maha Kumbh planetary rotation is measured as 12 x 12, equivalent to 144 years.

Time to Channel One's Consciousness and Spiritual Energy

According to yogic parlance, it is the most scientific experience that can happen to our Universe. It is an auspicious time of culmination of various planets in a particular position in our galaxy. It is a time when this culmination sends forth its radiation to a particular spot on the earth and its surroundings Thus, the radiation cleanses the environment and confused minds of the masses, and in this way, peace and harmony are bestowed on humankind.

Symbolically, the ocean can be associated to consciousness and the stirring struggle of angels and demons to human awareness of desires and self-consciousness. The nectar is the liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth.

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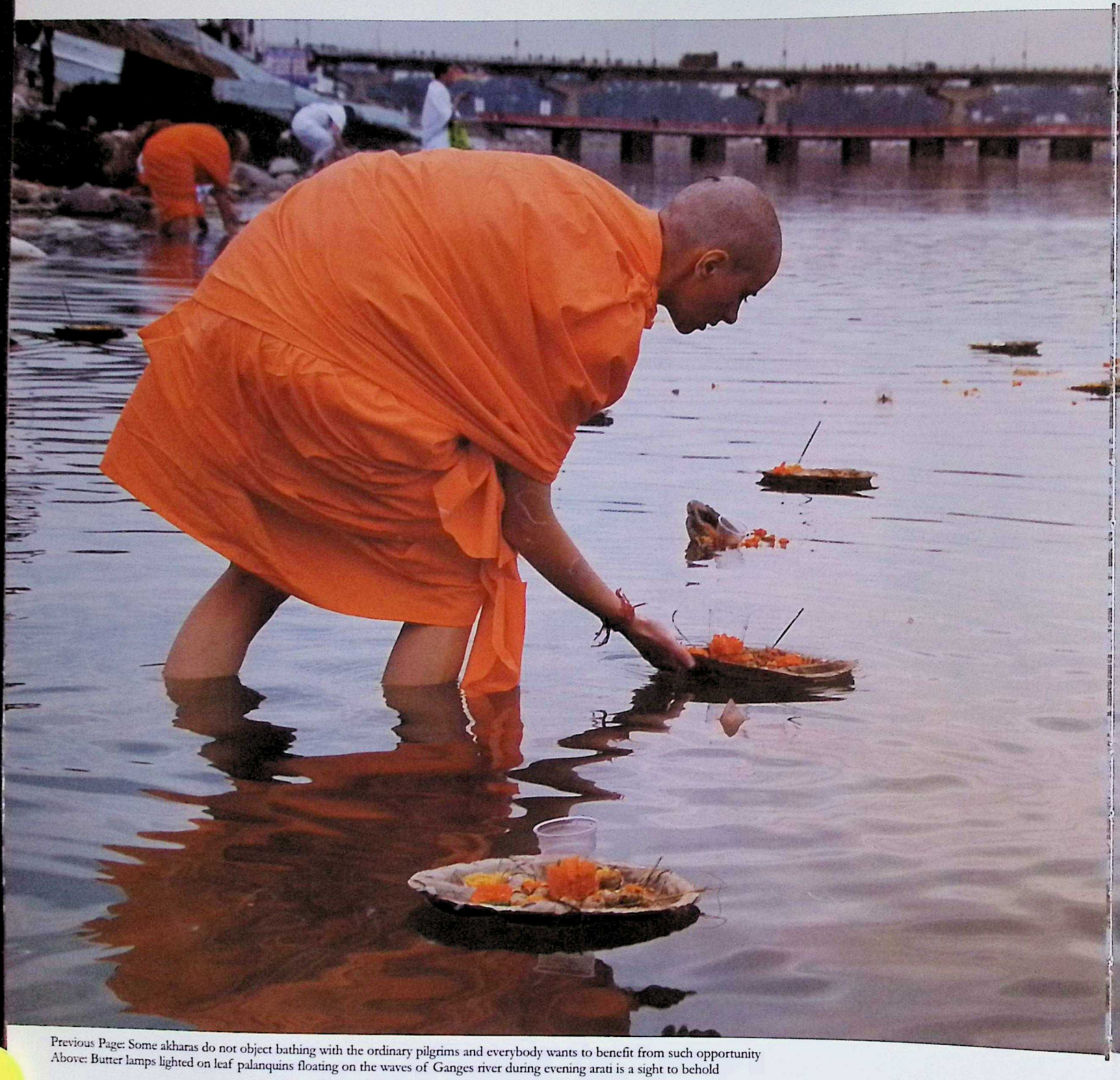

Previous Page: Some akharas do not object bathing with the ordinary pilgrims and everybody wants to benefit from such opportunity
Above: Butter lamps lighted on leaf palanquins floating on the waves of Ganges river during evening arati is a sight to behold

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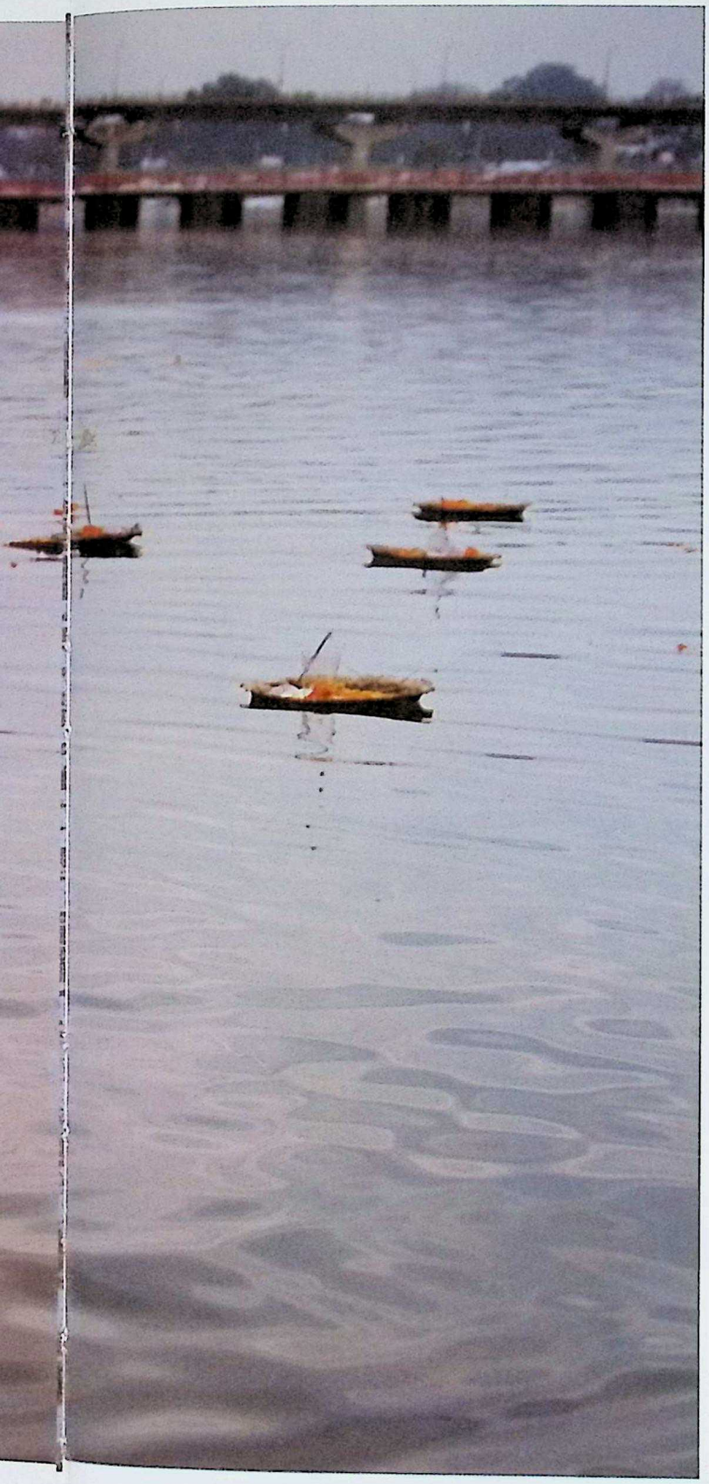

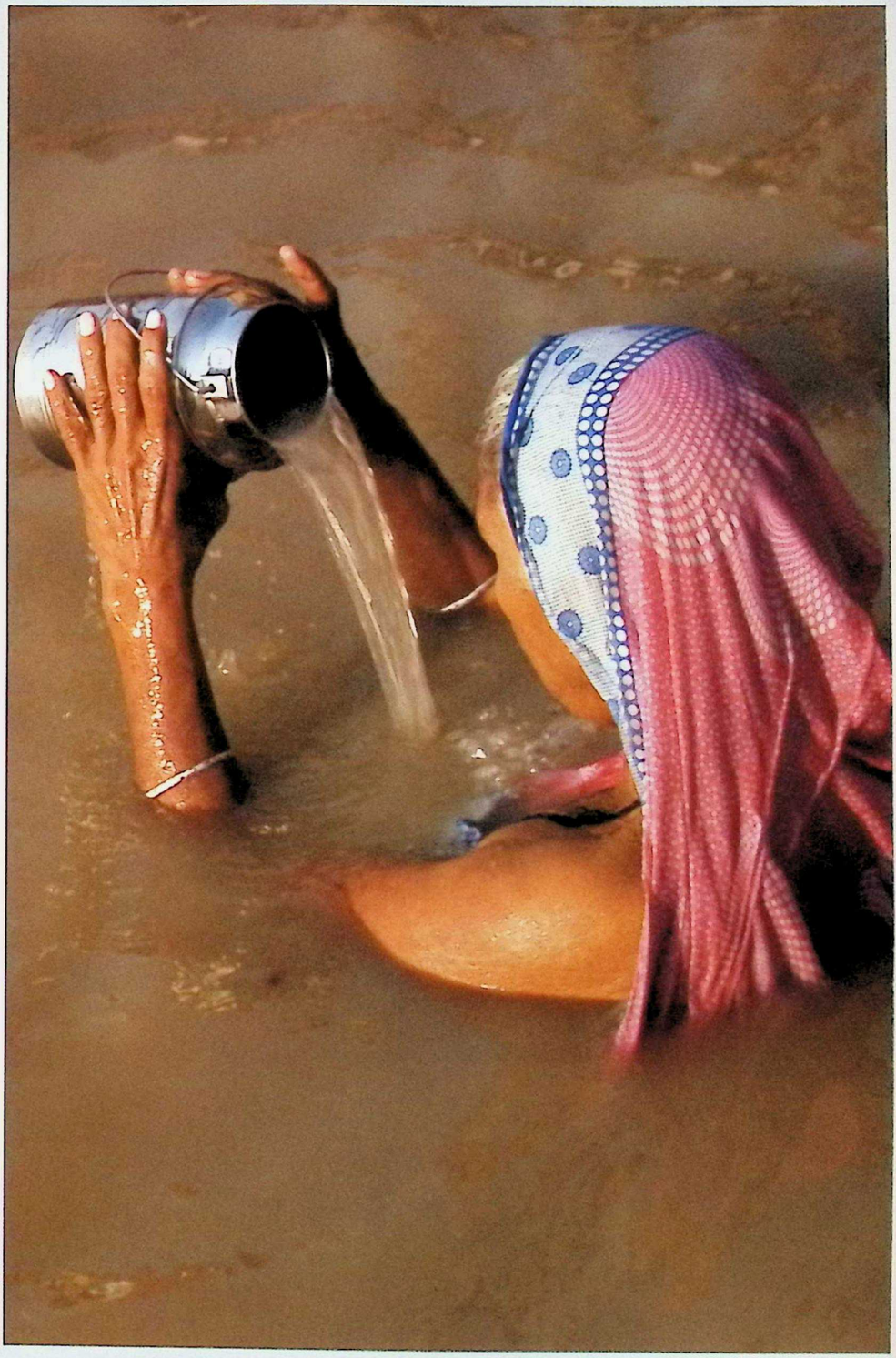

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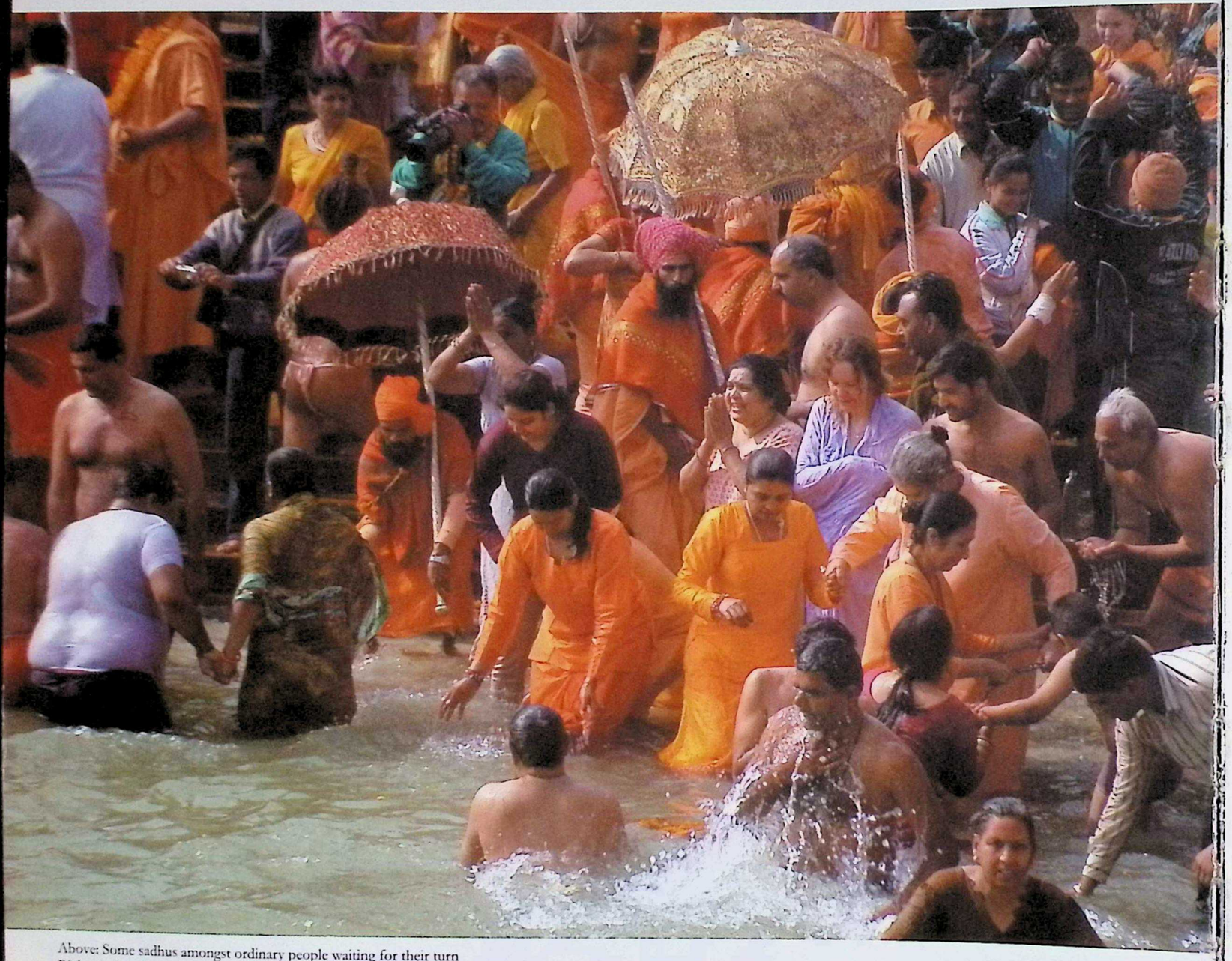

Above: Some sadhus amongst ordinary people waiting for their turn
Right: A devotee meditating in shallow waters

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A large amount of spiritual energy is accumulated during Kumbh mela due the presence of pilgrims. These people emanate spiritual vibrations engaged in practices such as prayer and meditation. They experience feelings of inner peace and religious devotion. As these feelings are experienced within, they simultaneously flow outward just as warmth radiates from a heat source. Pilgrimage shrines, because of the large number of people praying and meditating at them, become highly charged with these vibrations of peace and religious devotion. These vibrations have a lasting effect in the physical space. Sacred sites thus become memory banks of the accumulated peace and holiness manifested by countless pilgrims who have visited these shrines like 'Har Ki Pauri' during the Kumbh mela.

The saints and holy persons, who have lived and meditated at the sacred sites, also breed this field of accrued spiritual energy. A saintly individual, who leads an exemplary life, imbues his environment with the holiness that ensues from such practices. When we visit an ancient sacred site today, we place ourselves within the field. The comminuted field, generated by the pilgrims and the saints over the centuries is of great spiritual use to the masses.

This field of power is further amplified during major festivals held at the holy city. The sun's solstices, equinoxes, lunar standstills and the heliacal rising of various stars exemplify those linked with different periods in solar, lunar and stellar cycles. When 80 million pilgrims flock together at single place, the spiritual energy manifested by meditation, prayer and ceremony increases during that stipulated period.

A Sweeping Joy for the Sweepers of Mahakumbh

The first camp of Maha kumbh 2010 'Samanvaya Shivir' started on February 12, 2010 at Bharat Sadan. It was initiated by former Shankaracharya Swami Satyamitrananda, the founder of Bharat Mata Mandir. As a generous start towards a cleaner Kumbh, the chief minister of Uttarakhand Dr. Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank', distributed blankets among sweepers.

Quoting the great thinker of Nineteenth century, Swami Vivekananda, who explicated that God lives in Daridra Narayana (the poor and needy), Swami Satyamitrananda said that he wished to begin the mega event by paying courtesies to the 'combatants of cleanliness' (swachhata key prahari).

In order to make Uttarakhand, the 'devbhoomi' state as a role model for others, the chief minister of Uttarakhand said that no stone would be left unturned. He said, "Uttarakhand state is like the forehead of the mother India. Revamping its heritage, Mahakumbh will be turned into an exemplary event which is the pride of not only India but for the entire world."

The Chief Minister announced that the daily wages of sweepers have been raised to Rs.180. It was ensured that they would not be entrapped in formalities such as opening of bank accounts for receiving their dues. Cash payment was ensured to all sweepers.

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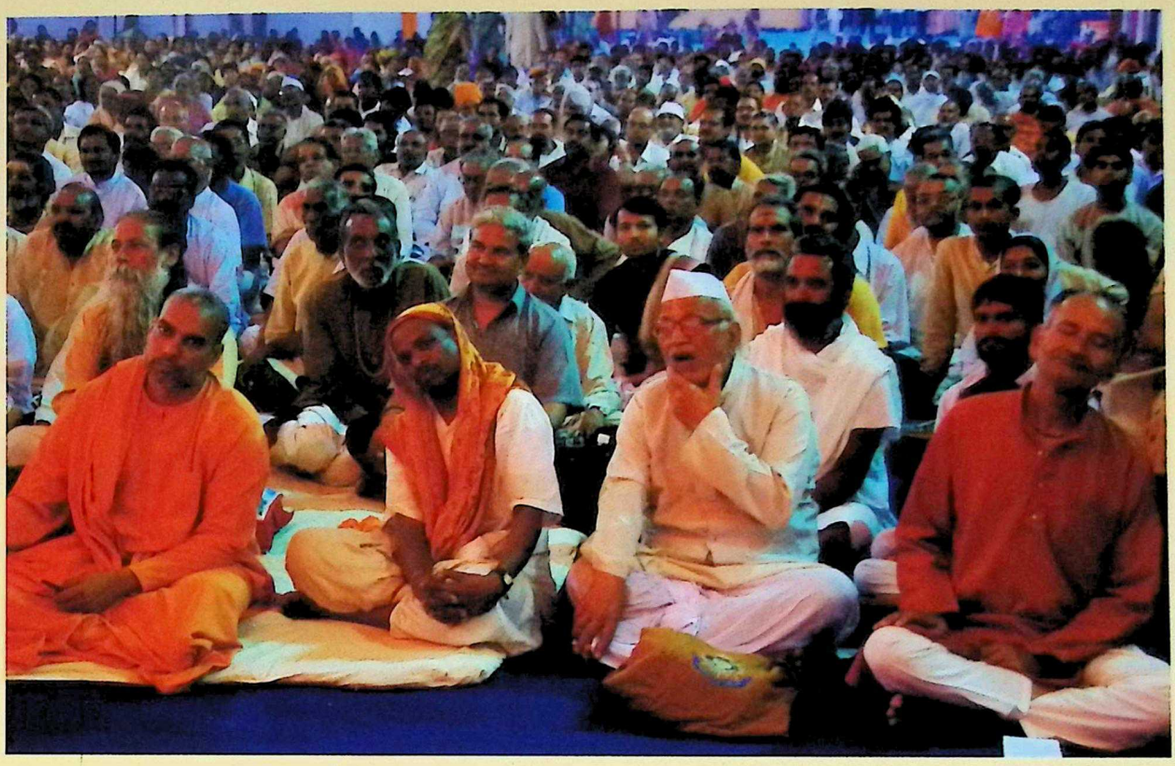

Above: Chief Minister of Uttarakhand and Swami Satya mitranand distributing blankets to the sweepees before beginning of Kumbh Mela

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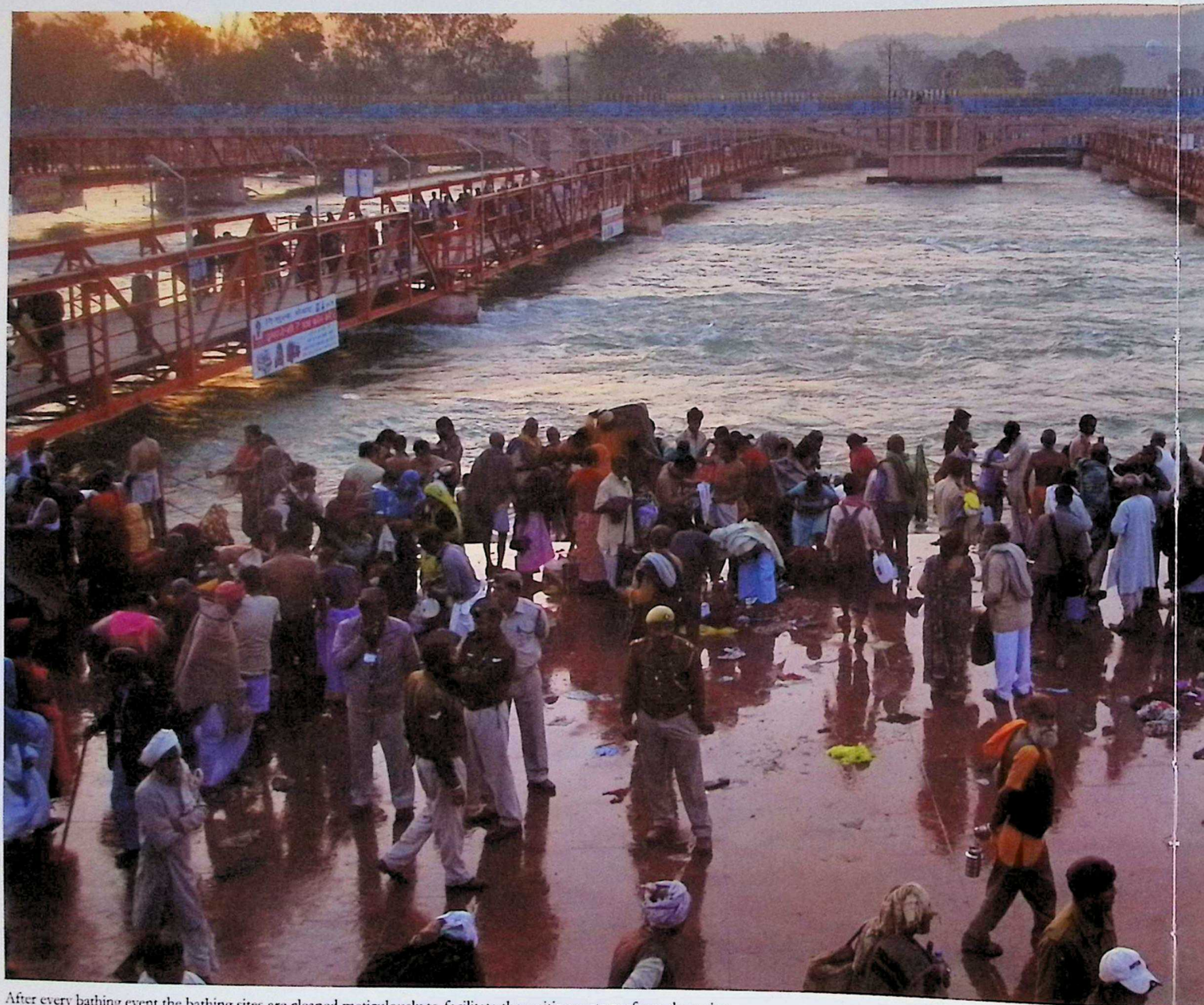

After every bathing event the bathing sites are cleaned meticulously to facilitate the waiting sects perform there sites

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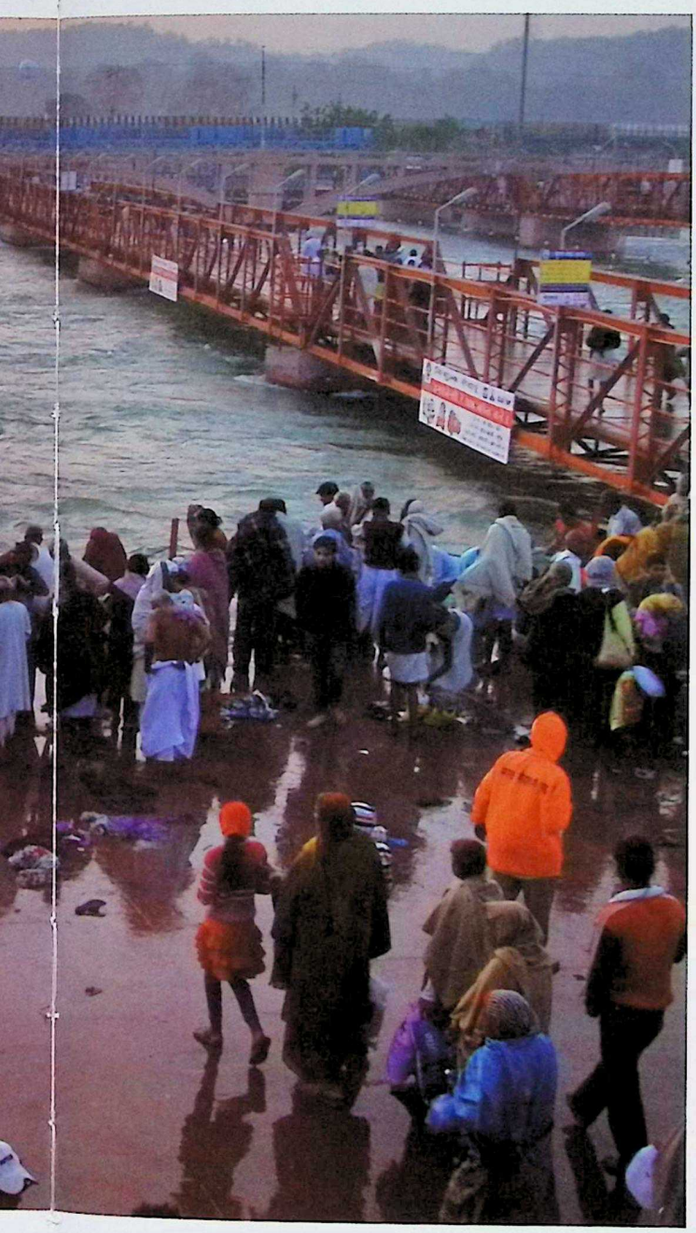

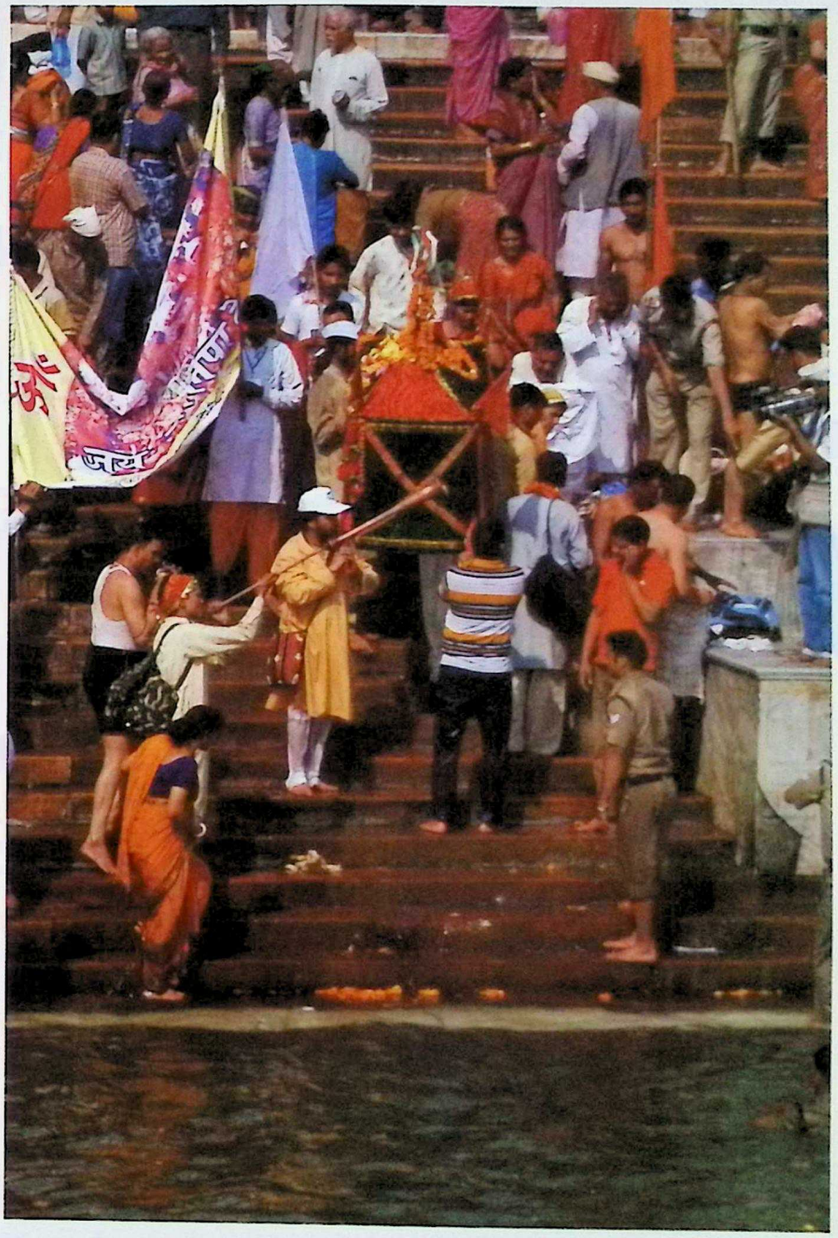

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'Bhu- Samadhi' (earth confinement) to Save Ganga

Showing concern over the growing pollution of river Ganges, many saints had adopted different modus operandi to create awareness and save the holy Ganga. Some took out 'padyatras' (travels by foot) while others showed banners. A saint from Delhi, belonging to Juna akhara, who had come for Kumbh mela in the holy city, adopted a unique way of practicing austerity to draw the attention to the major issues of today.

Going from VIP ghat to media centre, I came across a renunciant baba (Arun Nath) who had taken bhu-samadhi (confinement in earth). Utilizing his yogic kriyas, the sadhu had immersed himself into a 6-feet deep pit with just his head and face outside! This was the second time baba had taken Samadhi (confinement) of this kind.

"He started this practice on first day of Navratra and would come out only at the end of navratras after 8 days," said Adyutananda Shastri, the secretary of baba.

Baba had undergone this austerity to create awareness for world peace and believed his austerity acts would help people rise to the cause of saving Ganges from pollution. Two days before taking Samadhi, baba pursued prakshalan kriyas to flush out toxins from his body. One spoonful of glucose with the same quantity of water twice a day was his only diet.

'Save The Environment' - A Clarion Call at Kumbh Mela

The Copenhagen summit may have been disappointing for climate delegates across the world, but spiritual leaders at Kumbh mela felt the heat of the melting Himalayan glaciers. They participated actively in the ranks of green crusaders to raise their voice against the global warming. Hundreds of thousands of Naga sadhus had decided to exploit the Kumbh mela, 2010 as a platform to kick-start a green campaign against global warming.

Haridwar's billboards usually endorse about political gatherings, yoga classes or religious ceremonies in the town in flashy saffron text. The Mahakumbh mela was no longer limited to orations and sermons on loudspeakers, ritualistic dips in the Ganges and mass dinner for devotees. It turned eco-friendly, for it was driven by growing environmental concerns in Uttarakhand over the construction of dams and pollution of the river that is considered holy by Hindus. Various religious camps at the Kumbh sought to mobilize pilgrims by involving them in tree plantation and garbage collection campaigns.

The first Soham Baba billboard, brimming with environmental slogans, read: "Save the earth from climate change. Plant trees. Make a promise. Take one dip, plant one tree. Take two dips, plant two trees, take ten dips, plant ten trees."

Soham baba mission with its active projects in across 128 nations launched its massive welfare and cleanliness programs in the holy city. The slogan of his mission was **'Recycle, Renew and Rejuvenate'.**

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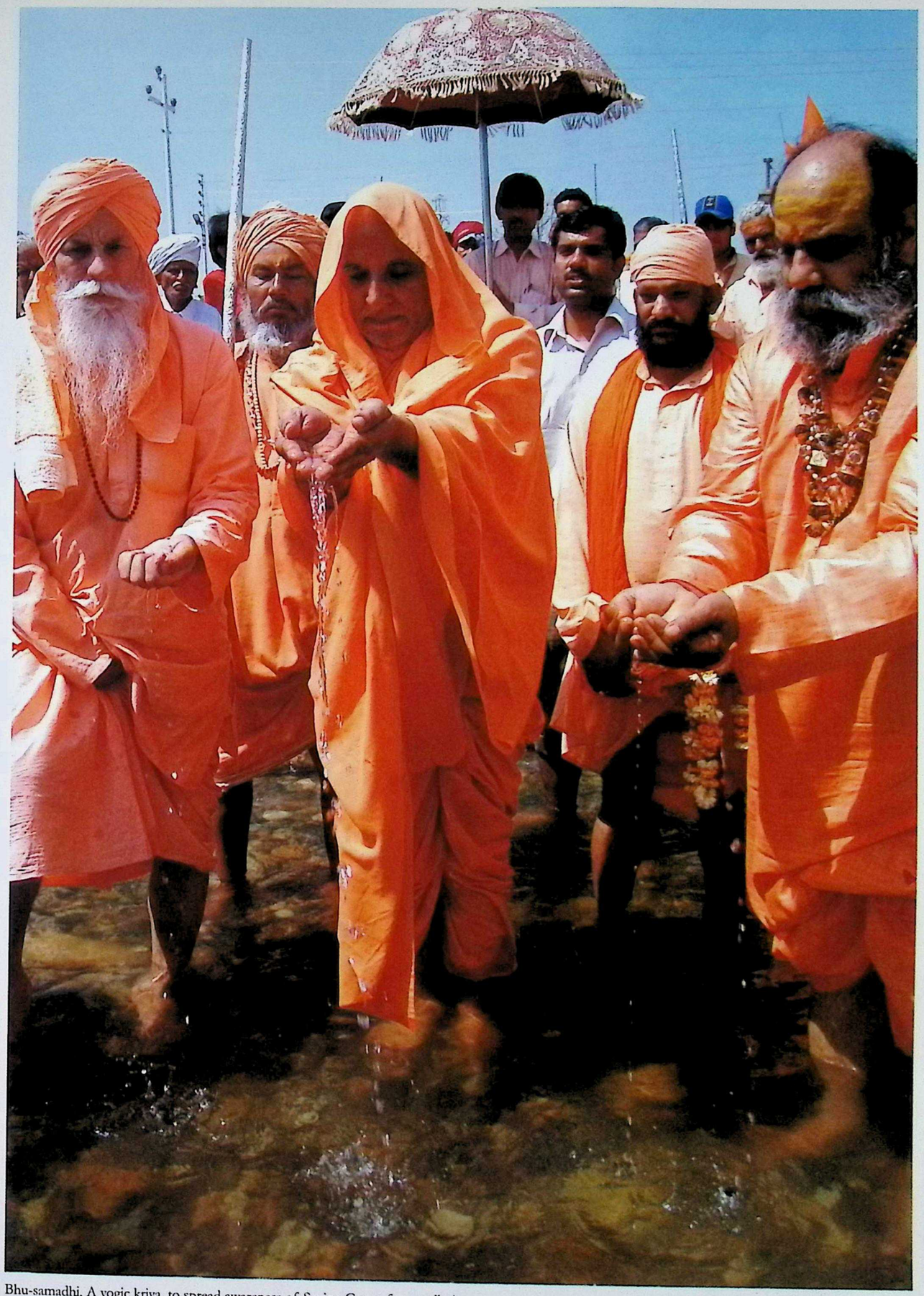

Bhu-samadhi, A yogic kriya, to spread awareness of Saving Ganga from pollution

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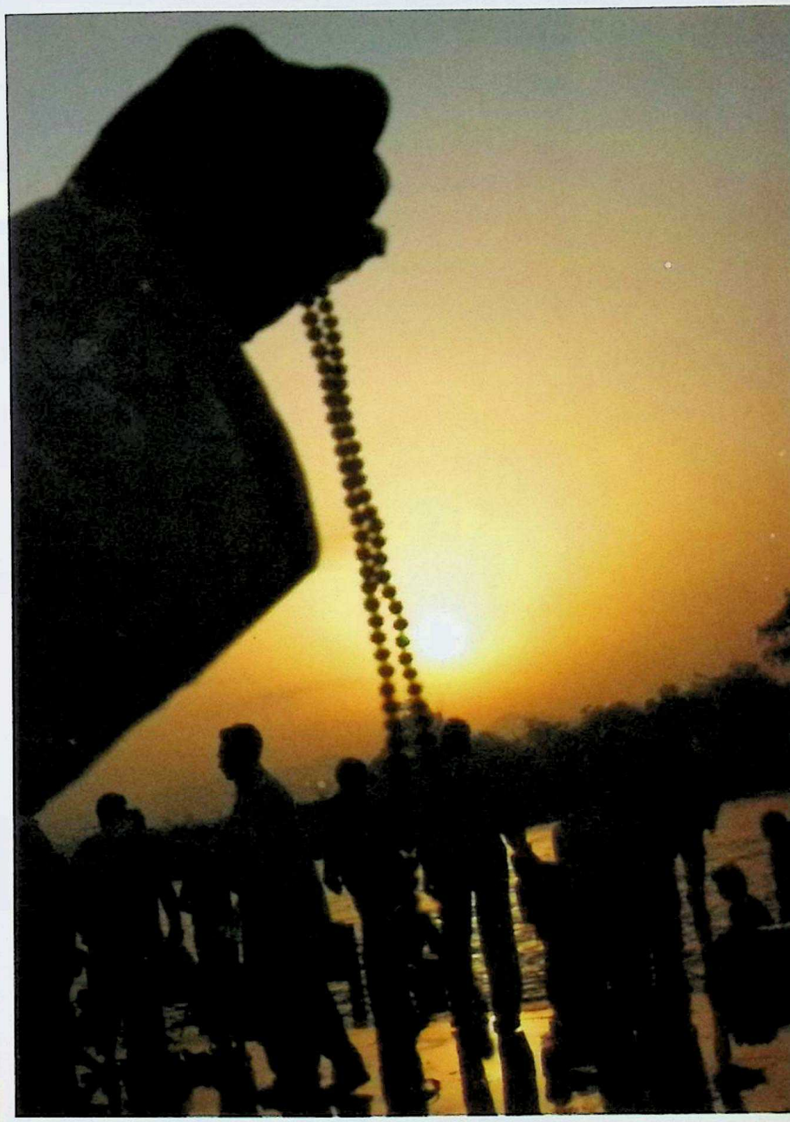

Left: Soham Baba of Netherlands, a neurosurgeon by profession makes clarion call at Kumbh mela to stop global warming and save the planet. Above: Holy tradition of severing Ganga alone can save the river

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What began as a trickle of humanity to the baba's sprawling camp had built up into a steady stream of pilgrims who sought green guidance or were simply curious. This was the first time that the holy man, with premonastic name Sudeep Anandgiri (40), was making an appearance at the Kumbh. According to baba, the action on climate change needs to be used as a tool for religion to make better contemporary sense.

"Since Kumbh mela is the largest spiritual gathering, we have decided to do our bit to save the planet from global warming. There will be a huge presence of international communities and press during the fair. We'll utilize the occasion to generate a 'save the planet' campaign worldwide," this Mahamandalesvara of Juna Akhara, Soham Baba informed me.

"We are the first to realize the impact of global warming as it causes glaciers to melt in the Himalayan region. I am telling you from my personal experience, I felt the impact of global warming almost 25 years back. It's not a very new phenomenon," he said.

The spiritual leader claimed in the Himalayas a few decades back, there were a variety of species of birds and flowers which are on the verge of going extinct due to the effects of global warming. Stepping out of Soham Baba's camp in Gaurishankar Dweep, I noticed a big enclosure where inmates of the ashram were dumping waste material. This was a bid to keep the campus clean.

The Significant Traditions of Past

Many significant traditions were followed in Indian society during the ancient time to save water from pollution. People during that era considered it sinful to pollute the waters of wells, ponds and rivers. The waters of the Ganges were procured for worship. River banks were not approached with shoes on. When crossing a wooden bridge over the Ganges, people used to take off their shoes and held them in their hands. Gargling, brushing of teeth and washing of clothes in the Ganges were acts of sins.

However, the scenario is reversed as people are not ashamed to openly cast sewage into the Ganges. It must have taken great effort on the part of ancient rishis to enforce habits of keeping water resources clean. We can never repay their debt. The polythene and worship material like incense sticks, matchstick stubs, old calendars of deities and other such material continue to flow in the river. However, our rishis also gave an alternative of disposing the used material at the roots of a Peepal tree.

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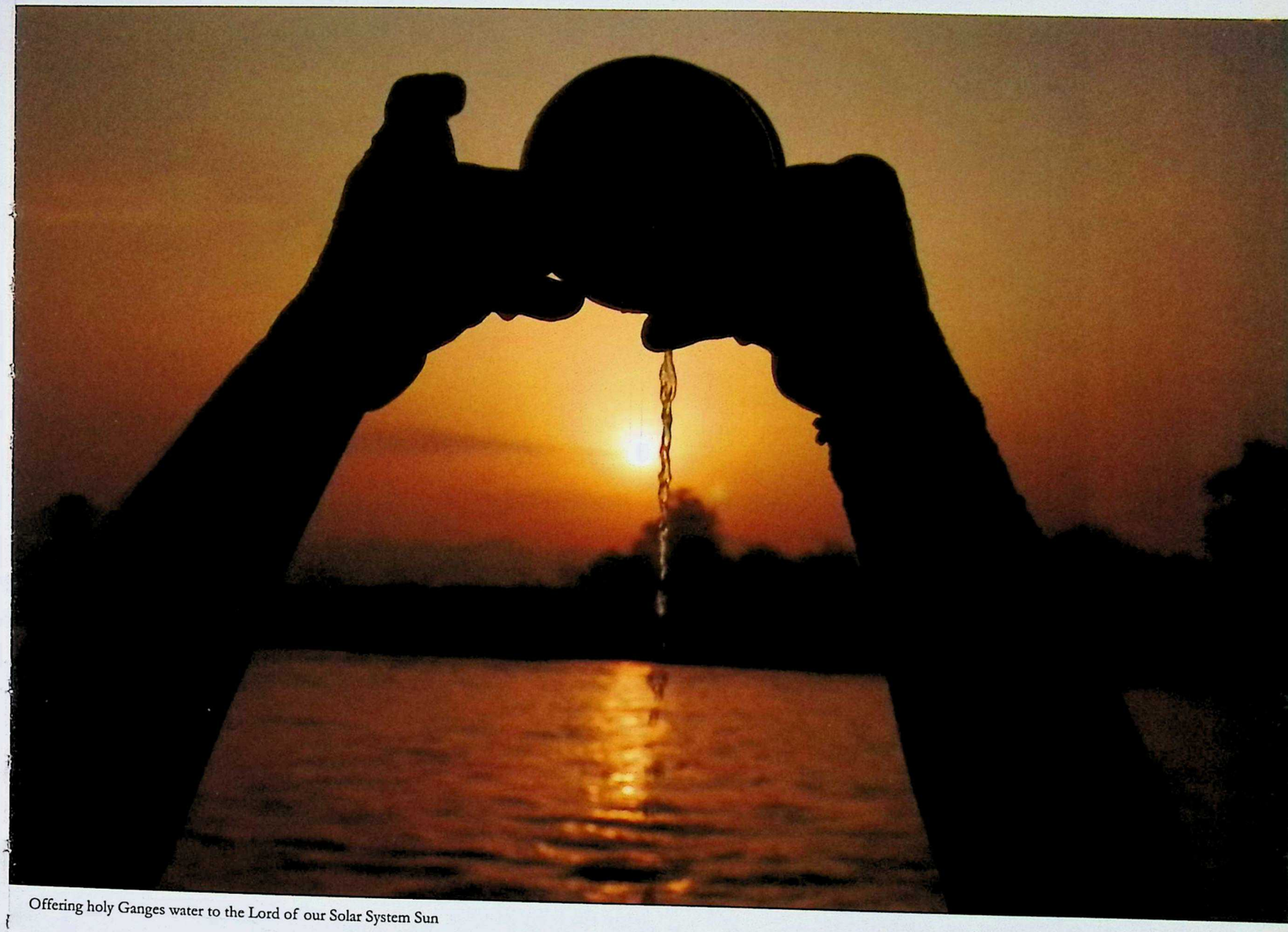

Offering holy Ganges water to the Lord of our Solar System Sun

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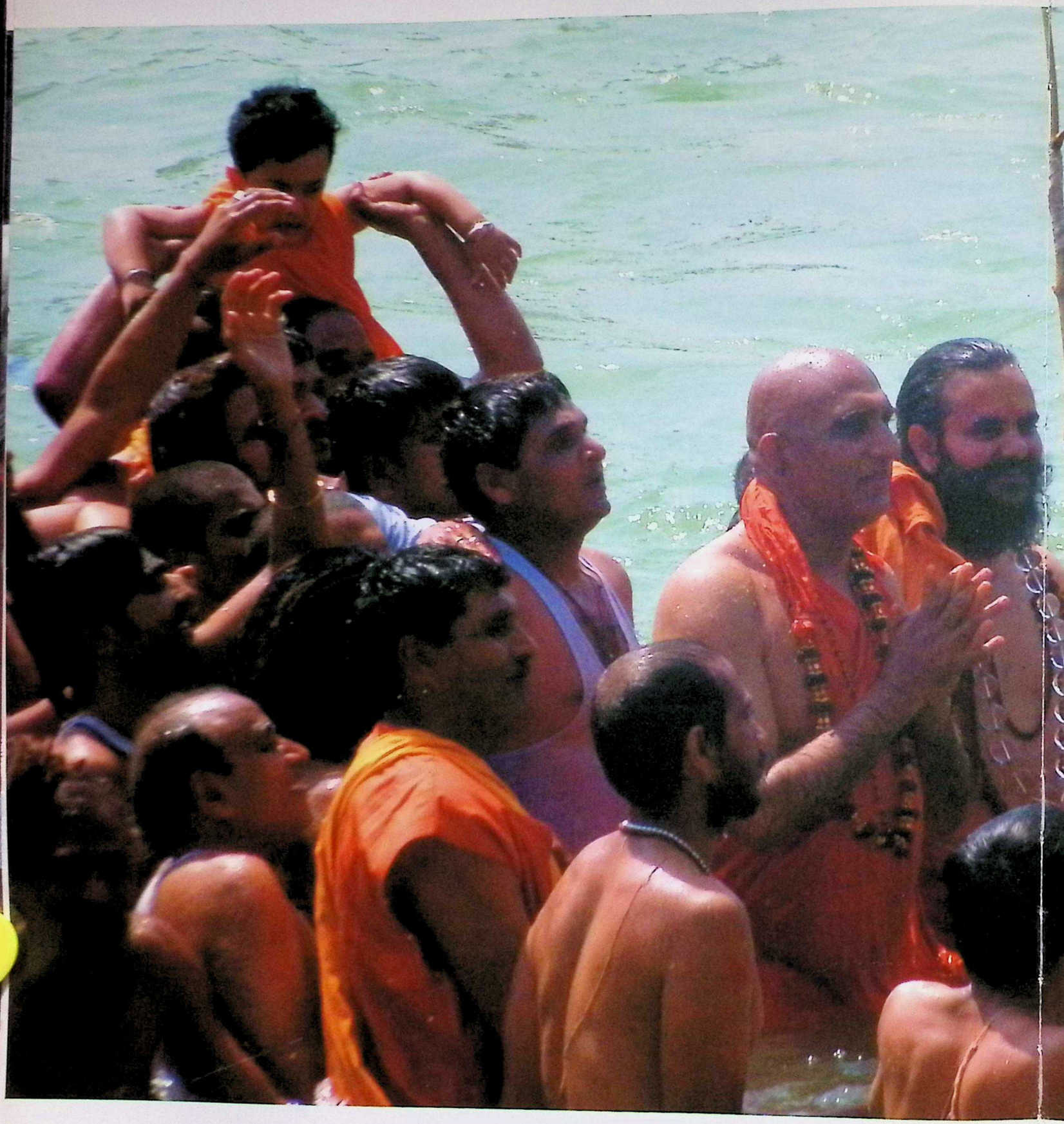

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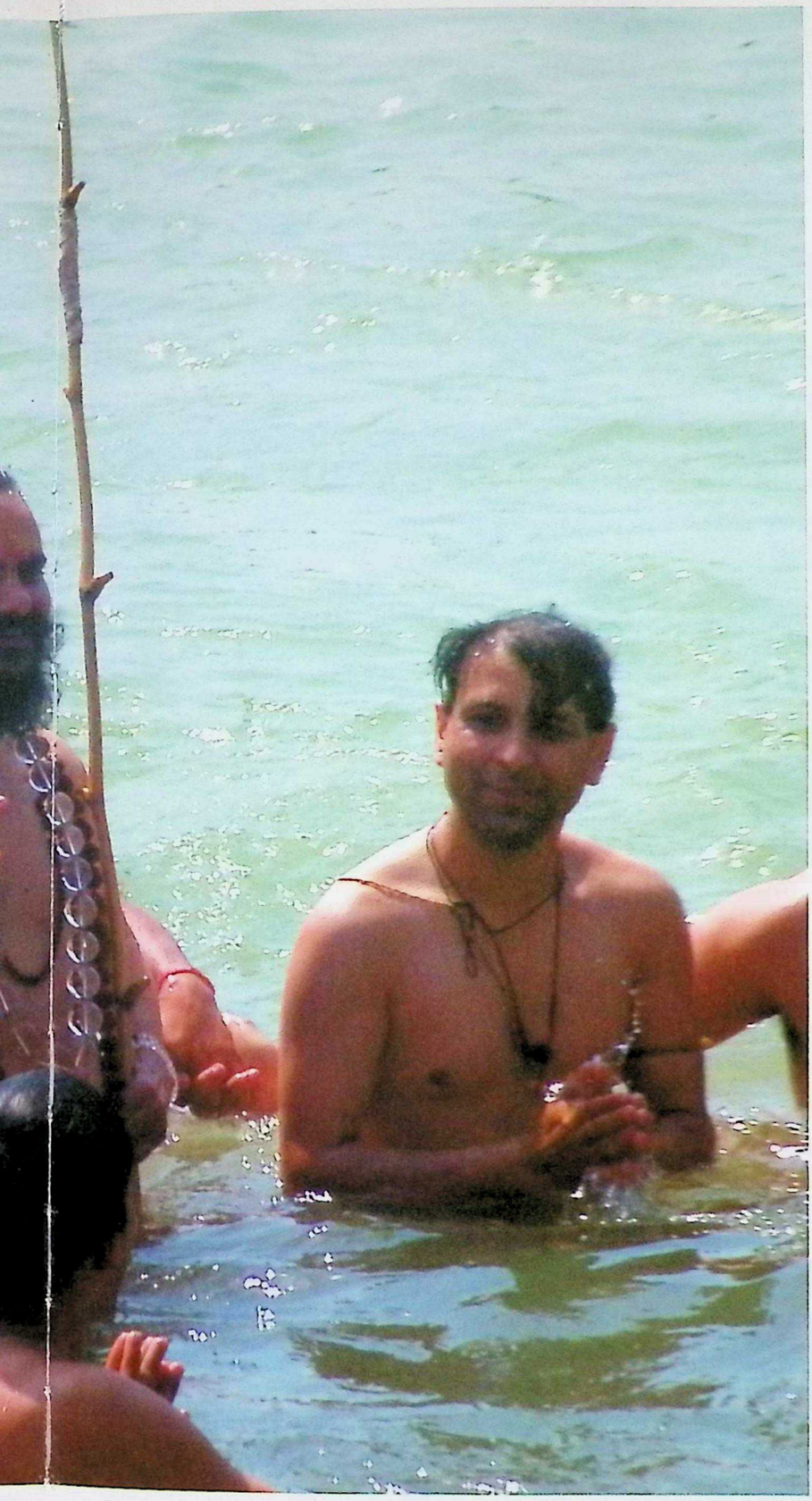

Left: A Priest offering prayers with his follower

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Save Ganga Save India

The 'Ganga cleaning project' gets a boost from the government as it has recieved Rs.1,394.11 crore for its execution. Out of this, Rs. 45 crores is the share for Uttarakhand state. The other states sanctioned funds from this amount are Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal.

The sanctioned money will be spent on the development of sewer lines; sewage treatment plants (STPS) and sewage pumping stations and building community toilets. Development of river fronts, ghats and running awareness campaigns are also on the agenda of the Ganges cleaning project.

The Ganges water is fit for bathing. It has been confirmed by many recent studies. Scientists from IIT Roorkee keep tabs on the quality of waters of the holy Ganges. The samples of water from upstream, midstream and downstream were taken a day before and after the first shahi snan to measure the level of pollutants. This examining team was headed by Dr. A. A. Kazmi.

The report said: "The level of pollution in the Ganges during the main snans in the month of January and Shivarati day is much below the prescribed norms."

February12 – The Day of Shahi Snan

The 99mpn (most probable number) per 100 ml of water now dipped below 200 mpn! According to reports, if the number of faecal coliform reaches 200, about 8 out of 1000 people taking bath in the Ganges are likely to suffer from waterborne diseases.

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Top: Cleanliness drive on bathing ghats

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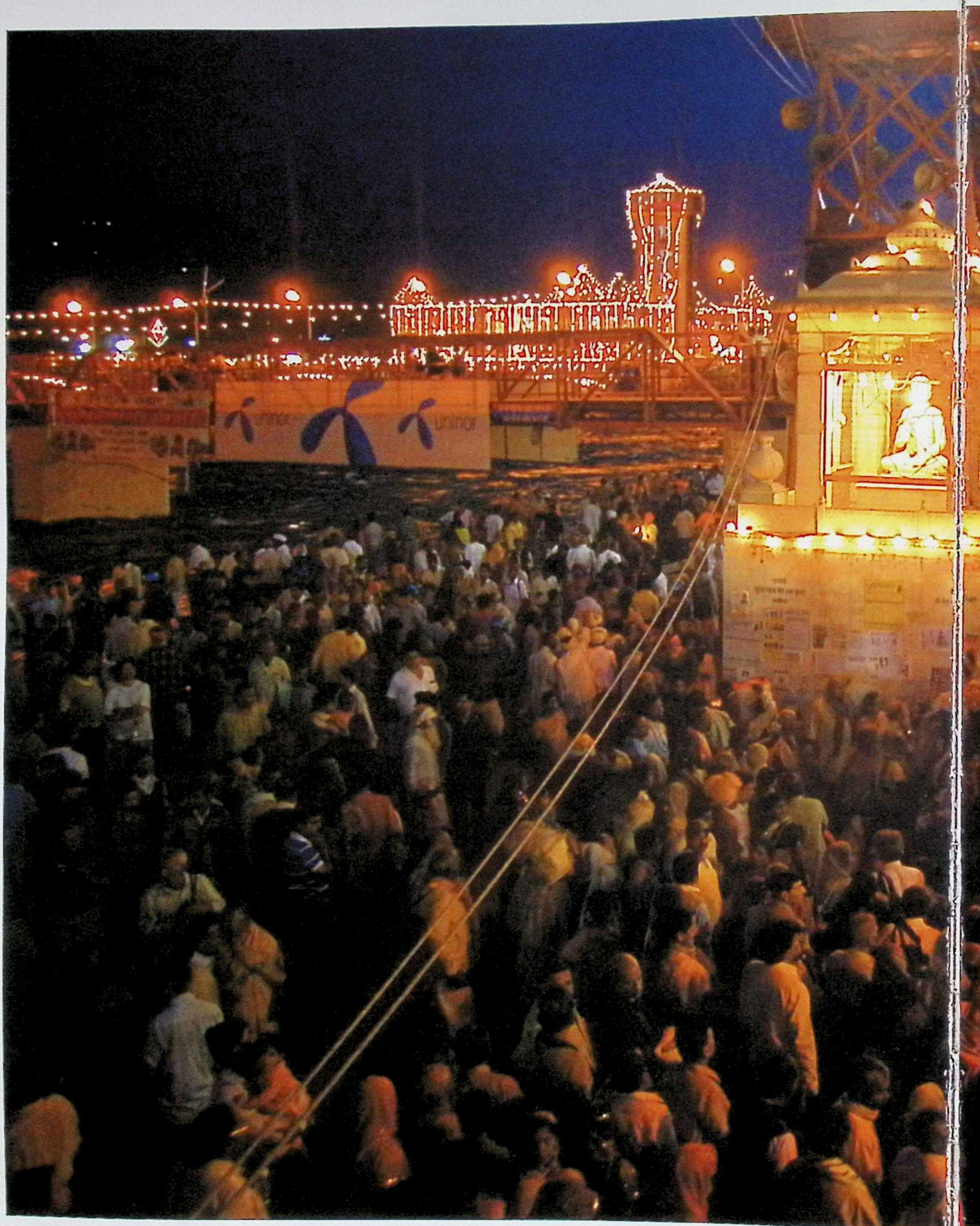

Day in and Day out the bathing process goes on like this

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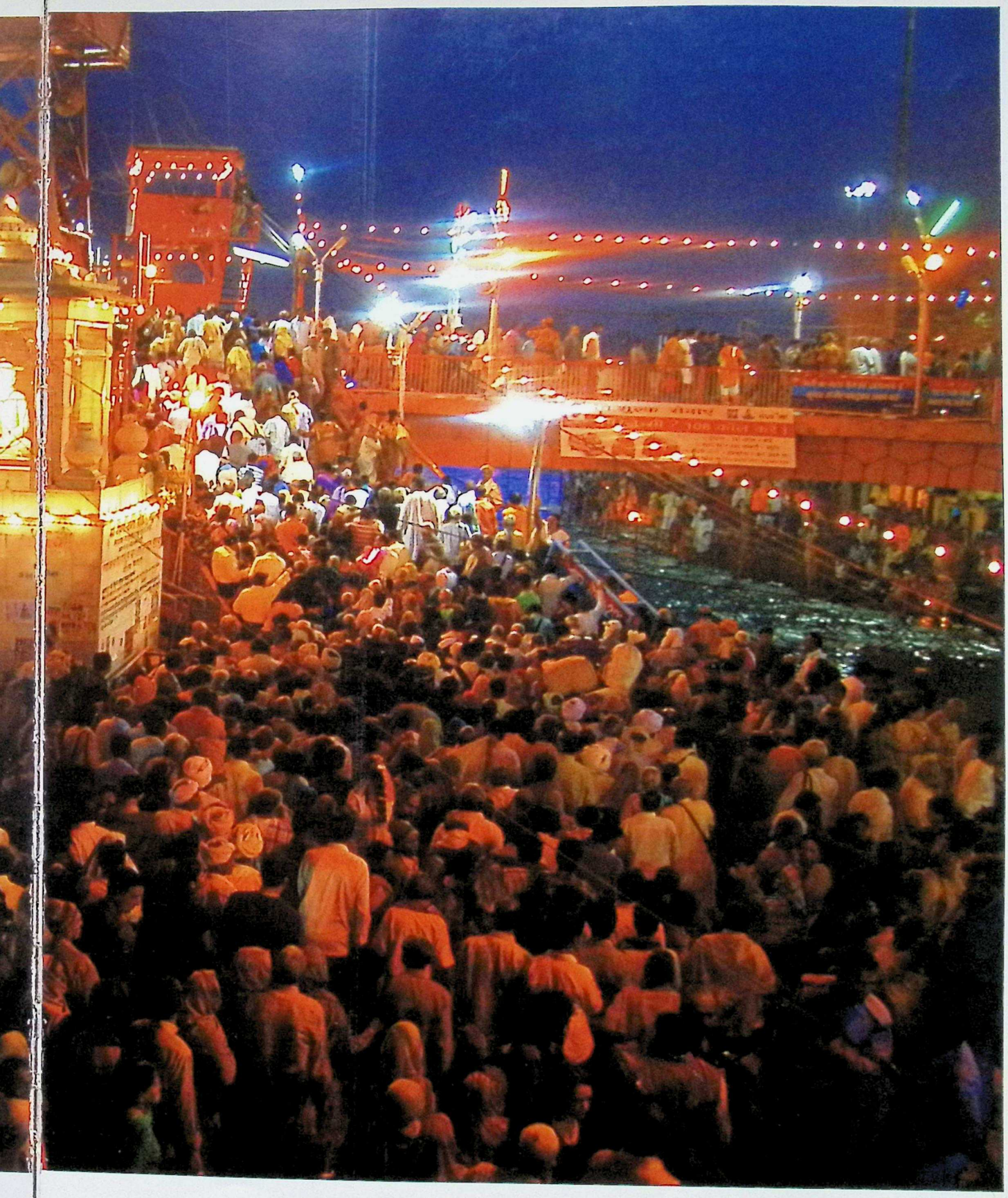

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Sparsh Ganga Project initiated by CM

The Dalai Lama had emphasized at Rishikesh the need for Indians to take initiative towards promoting secular ethics.

"The countrymen must take the lead in promoting secular ethics," said Dalai Lama.

"Indian tradition of non-violence and harmony among various faiths should be followed," added Dalai Lama in an attempt to inspire general public present a model before the rest of the world.

Speaking at a gathering of spiritual gurus drawn from various faiths, Dalai Lama said that voluntary efforts must complement governmental initiatives in cleaning the Ganga and addressing other pressing environmental concerns.

"You should be proud of your nation, and you should be proud of your spiritual heritage. You (India) must continue to promote non-violence and harmony among different faiths (no matter where you are). No matter where they are, the Chinese find a way to promote their food. Similarly, Indians, wherever they are present in a group, in any part of the world, should promote the ideals of ahimsa (non-violence) and harmony," said the Dalai Lama.

He also emphasized that "modern-day secular ethics (like compassion and kindness)" must complement "traditional values (like non-violence in society)".

The Dalai Lama, along with spiritual gurus, participated in a function and swore to clean the Ganga. BJP leaders L K Advani and Uttarakhand Chief Minister Dr. Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank', Yoga guru Baba Ramdev were among those present at the 'Ganga Sparsh Abhiyaan' function organized by the Uttarakhand government.

"We must talk about issues like global warming and the need to save the Ganges. Spiritualism is extremely important for us in this age and so is ecology," added the Tibetan guru. He further said that "Secular Ethics" must be combined with "Traditional Wisdom".

Sparsh Ganga Campaign went on Track with 9 Points Plan –

We will not throw plastic in the river
We will not throw bottles in the river
We will not use soap at river bank
We will not throw chemical in the river
We will not throw garbage in the river
We will not link up the drains to the river
We will inform to pollution control centre
We will be planting at river bank.
We will spread awareness to every human being about these sentiments.

Steps Undertaken:

In a bid to make the holy city free from polythene bags, various sectors of the administration launched drives during the Kumbh mela. Municipal Corporation head, Kamal Jora, banned the use of polythene at "Har Ki Pauri" and the mission was religiously followed by authorities of Rajaji National Park who instantly took a step forward towards cleanliness. They stepped up their move in the direction of non-usage of polythene at Mansa Devi premises. The shopkeepers and tourists were strictly instructed to use jute bags for sale and purchase of commodities.

Complete ban was imposed on visitors and tourists taking polythene bags inside the park area. A penalty system is on its way penalize defaulters. According to the park officials, appeals were being made to the shopkeepers outside the temple selling 'prashad' (offering) to shun the use of polythene. During the Kumbh mela, more than 40 bags of polythene waste were recovered from the Mansa Devi hillocks. Officials were deputed for a security check of the tourists entering the temple premises. Tourists carrying polythene bags were denied entry to the temple area.

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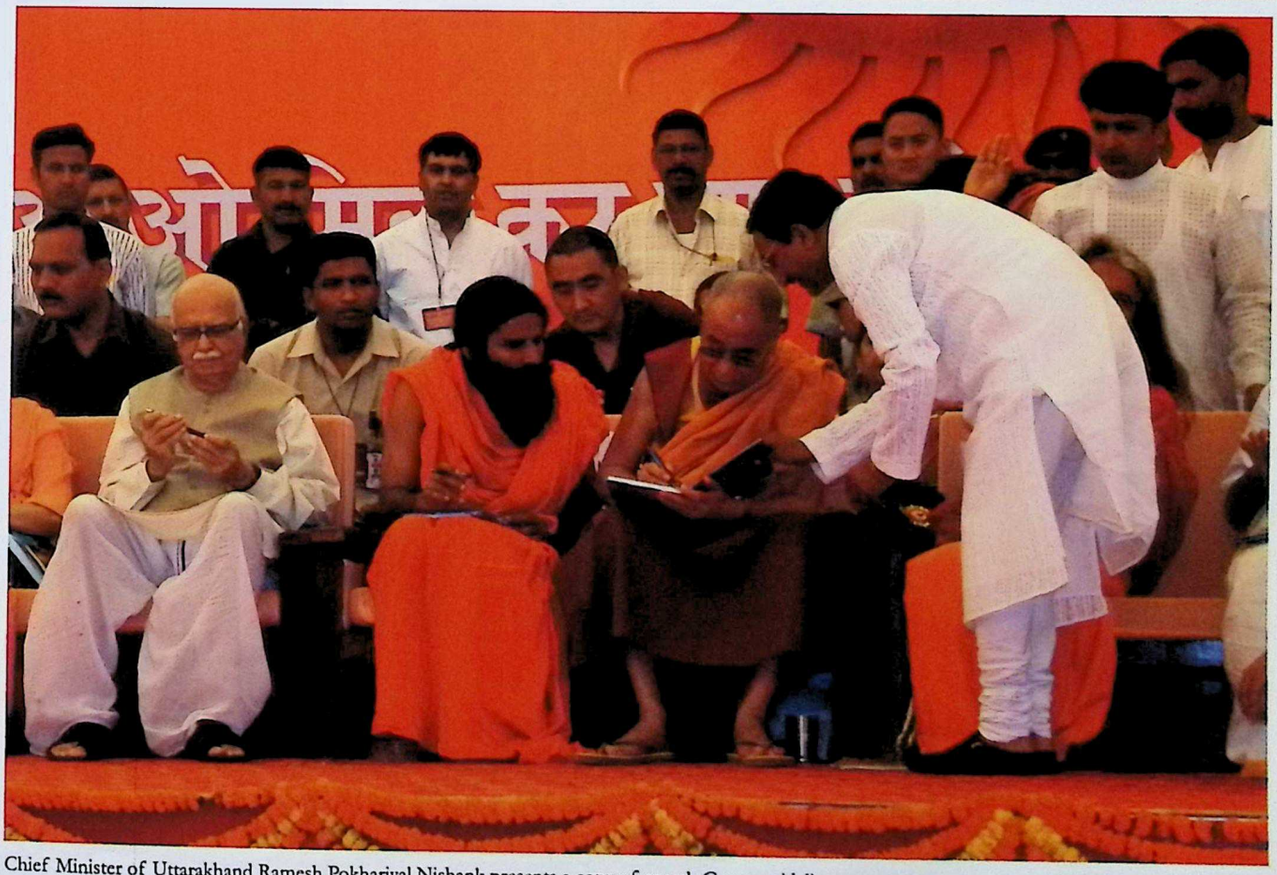

Chief Minister of Uttarakhand Ramesh Pokhariyal Nishank presents a copy of sparsh Ganga guidelines to his holiness. Dalai Lama. Also seen are Baba Ramdev and senior parliamentarian, L.K. Advani.

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Wealth from Waste

Baba Ramdev allocated waste collection cycle rickshaws in support of 'Paryavaran Mitra Yojna' (friends of environment) campaign. 'Separate the organic and non-organic waste' was the message propagated and twin dustbins were distributed among people. Special waste collection cycle rickshaws were on track, which went from door to door, asking for waste. Red and green twin waste bins were chartered for organic and non-organic waste respectively and seen doting the city skyline. The 'Friends of Environment Project' in town hall of the holy city was started by distributing 25 waste collection cycle rickshaws to the 'Paryavaran mitras' (Sweepers) by Baba Ramdev of Patanjali Yog peeth.

The concept was visualized by Deputy Collector Harak Singh Rawat who had already initiated this project successfully in Srinagar district of Uttarakhand during his tenure as SDM. Two hundred hand-operated rickshaws and 30 peddle rickshaws were distributed among municipal corporation sweepers. The District health officer, district magistrate, urban development minister and other NGOs also participated.

Within five days of assignment of duty in the Kumbh mela, Harak Singh Rawat initiated the project successfully. Talking to media, he said, "Polythene has become inevitable part of our lives and is causing lot of havoc to environment. I have successfully implemented it in Srinagar and a big recycling project has been commissioned through which a Paryavaran mitra can earn up to Rs.3500 per month."

Epitomizing a lady industrialist of China, who utilized solid waste by recycling it and turned into the biggest industrialist of the nation, Swami Chidanand Muni (of Rishikesh) urged general public to utilize the waste towards generating extra income.

"I was touched to see that three and one half kilograms of solid waste was retrieved from cow's stomach. The holy animal is dying and harm is also being done to the Ganges River. Unless everyone realizes to keep the street as clean as his own home, the city cannot be kept clean." he said.

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Cleanliness drive by saints and administrators of Haridwar. Red and green bins distributed in city for separating organic and inorganic waste. .

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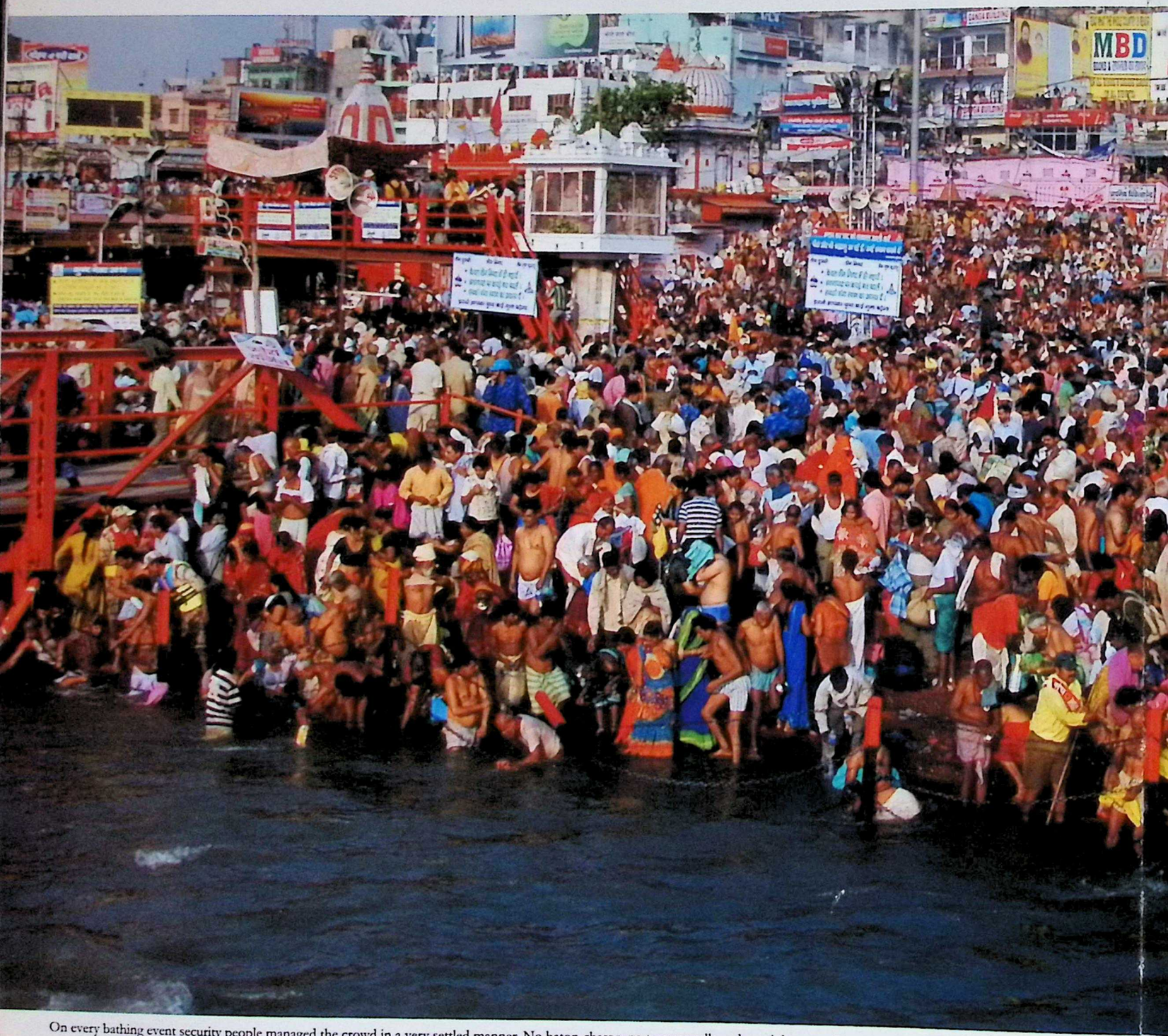

On every bathing event security people managed the crowd in a very settled manner. No baton-charge, no tear gas sells and no violence at all.

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ॐ सर्वेषां स्वस्तिर्भवतु, सर्वेषां शान्तिर्भवतु।
सर्वेषां पूर्ण भवतु, सर्वेषां मंगल भवतु।।
सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः सर्वे सन्तु नरामयाः।
सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तु मां कश्चिद् दुःख भाग्भवेत्।।

LET IT BE SO ORDAINED, THAT ALL THE PEOPLE, EXPERIENCE WELL-BEING;
LET ALL THE PEOPLE EXPERIENCE PEACE OR TRANQUILITY. LET ALL THE PEOPLE EXPERIENCE WHOLENESS
AND COMPLETENESS; LET THEM EXPERIENCE PROSPERITY AND AUSPICIOUSNESS.
MAY IT SO HAPPEN THAT EVERYONE RECEIVES HAPPINESS; LET THEM ALL BE SAINT-LIKE
AND BE WITHOUT DISEASE AND IN GOOD HEALTH. LET THEM SEE WITH THEIR OWN EYES THE GOODNESS OF LIFE;
AND LET THEM NOT CONTEMPLATE IN THEIR CONSCIOUS MIND ANY SORROW INDUCING THOUGHTS WHILE THEY
REMAIN BENEFICIARIES OF GOOD FORTUNE.

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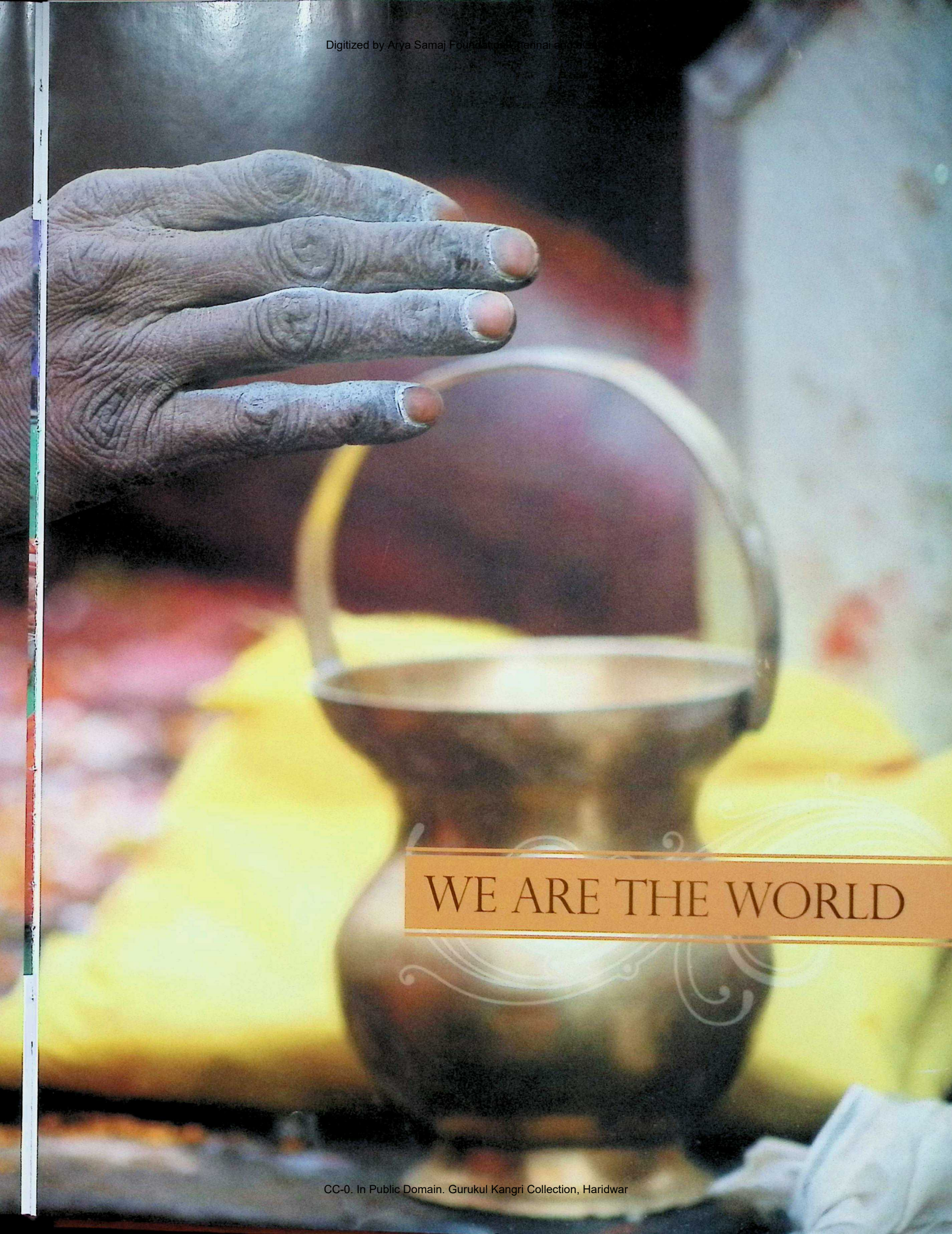

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India – The Prominent Figure on the World Map

India is a paragon for the phrase 'unity in diversity'. Its rich incredible culture, spectacular forts & places, great traditions and rituals and steady development has definitely made it a prominent figure on the world map. The so called 'country of snake charmers and magicians' now holds a wealth of technological advancements and boasts of a great civilization. From its people to lifestyle and the mystical charm, India has always charmed the world with her exquisiteness, mystery and uniqueness. A visit to India and grand festivities like Kumbh mela is the best way to get acquainted with various aspects and achievements of the country and its people.

In the words of twentieth century's greatest brain Albert Einstein:

"We owe a lot to the Indians, who taught us how to count, without which no worthwhile scientific discovery could have been made."

Apart from the numbers, India's gift to the world in the form of ironic 'zero' is held in high esteem. Without this figure and the concept, no diachronic development would have been possible.

When it comes to philosophy, we are, even now head and shoulders above any nation, as the great German philosopher Schopenhauer had confessed:

"In music, India gave to the world her system of notation with the seven cardinal notes and the diatonic scale. In Philology, our Sanskrit language is now universally acknowledged to be the foundation of all European languages. In manufacture, India was the first to make cotton and purple dye; mostly all the spices are the product of India. Even the games of chess and cards and dice were invented in India."

"If there is any land on this earth that can lay claim to be blessed Punya bhumi (Land of Goodness), the land where humanity has attained itself highest towards gentleness, towards generosity, towards purity, towards calmness, above all the land of introspection and of spirituality, it is India," said the greater philosopher thinker of 19th century, Swami Vivekananda.

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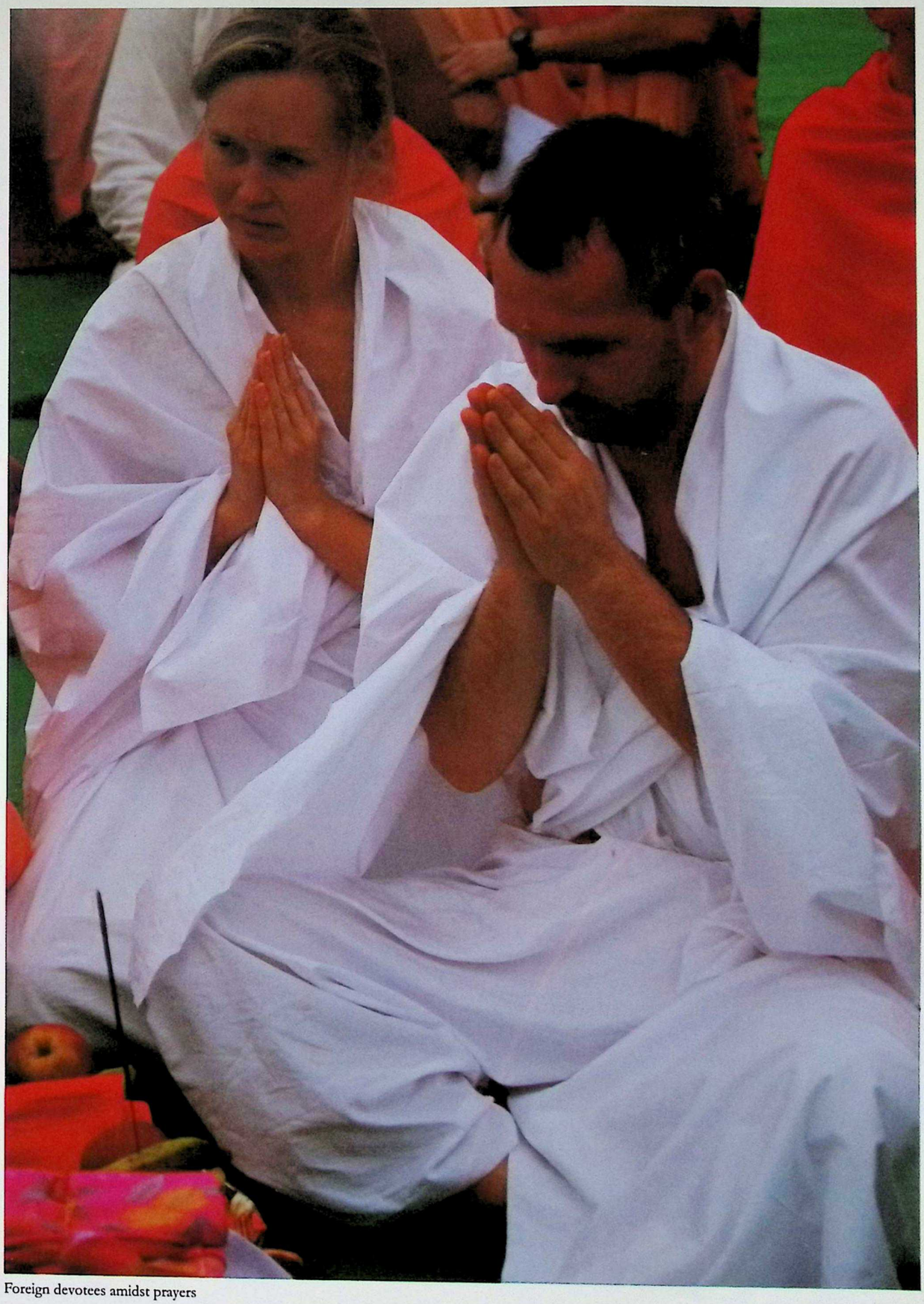

Foreign devotees amidst prayers

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India Taught PEACE to the World

The whole world looks forward to visit this country for inner peace. Why? Well, since the ancient ages, India has been considered as the epitome of peace. India never invaded any country in her last 10000 years of history and has always sent a message of peace to the world outside. It is the largest democracy in the world, the 6th largest country in the world and one of the most ancient and living civilizations (at least 10, 000 years old).

Hu Shih, former Ambassador of China to USA stated:

"India conquered and dominated China culturally for 20 centuries without ever having to send a single soldier across her border."

India has always invited foreign historians and geniuses since time immemorial. Mark Twain has said:

"India is, the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grandmother of tradition. Our most valuable and most constructive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only."

No wonder, thousands of foreign tourists from 140 countries visited Kumbh mela including tourists pouring in from nations such as France, America, Germany, Britain, Japan, Italy, Russia, Canada, Indonesia, Mauritius, Australia, China, Pakistan and Netherlands. Lured by Hindu philosophy and beliefs, many foreigners visited Kumbh mela in order to gain an insight into the religion and its ideologies.

In a major breakthrough, as compared to the Ardh Kumbh mela in 2004, the Tourism Department managed to attract about 8,053 more foreigners to taste the ambience of holy Ganga and its waters. In 2004, the total number of foreign visitors was over 2500 and in the year 2009, the number almost doubled making it 4500 whereas the mark crossed 10500 in the first two and a half months of the year 2010.

According to the sources, during Ardh Kumbh 675 foreigners visited the holy city and the Maha Kumbh figure touched 2178 mark. February saw 3606 tourists pouring in whereas Ardhkumbh had 864 and March was the boom time with score touching 4896 that rested at 1082 during ardhkumbh. Most of the visitors came to ashrams of Pilot baba, Soham baba, Swami Maheshwaranand, Patanjali Yog peeth, Shantikunj and Isckon.

"It is encouraging and a positive sign that the number of foreign tourists to Haridwar is growing manifold. Indian philosophy and culture beckons people from across the world," said Kumbh mela adhikari, Anand Bardhan.

For these foreigners, the experience of living in the proximity of holy men and to get knowledge about life and its philosophies is a different experience altogether. *"I feel Soham baba is a living incarnation of Lord Shiva and Indian philosophy is very much scientific as we learn from Babaji,"* said the elated Marija Olff, a devotee of the mission.

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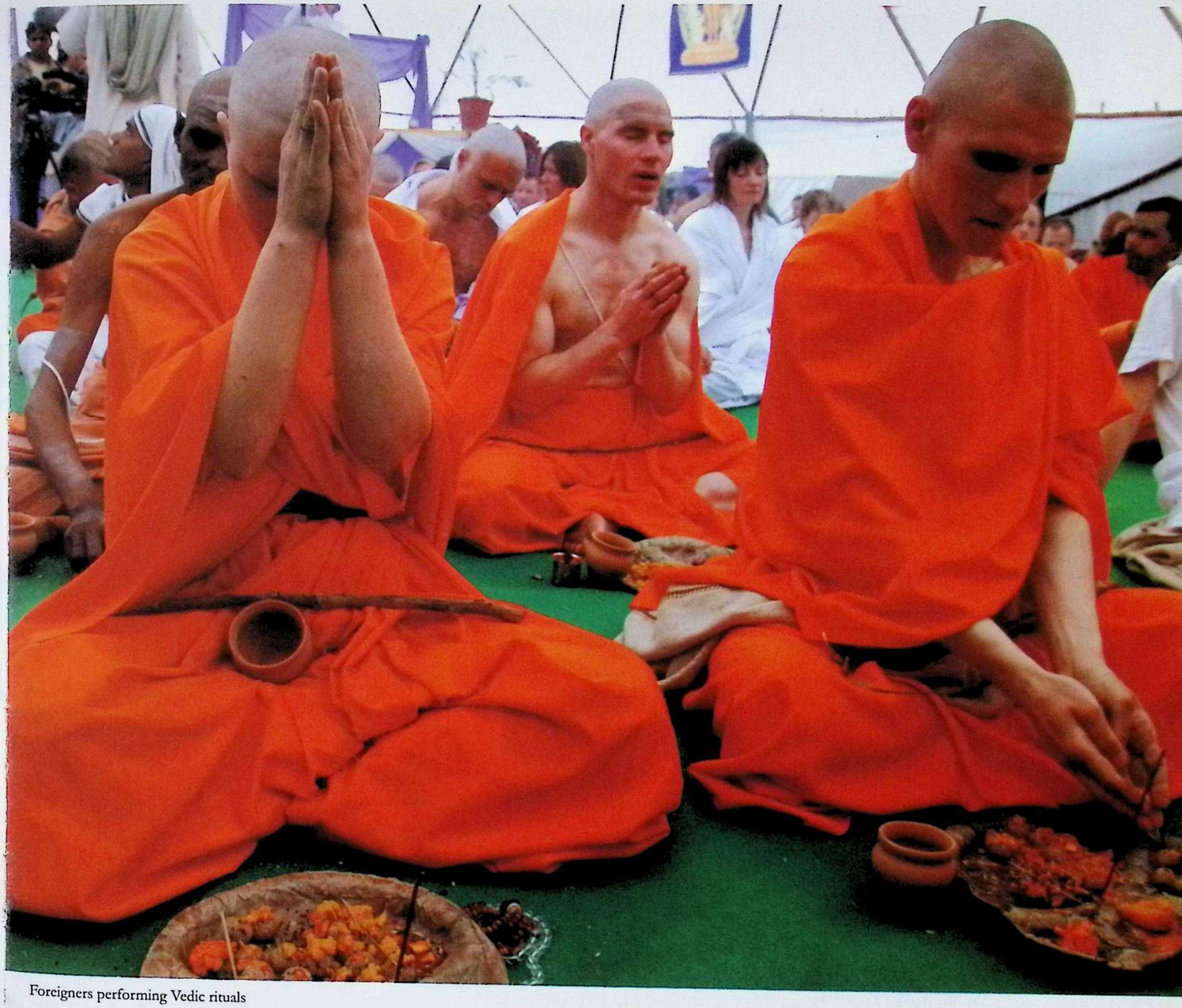

Foreigners performing Vedic rituals

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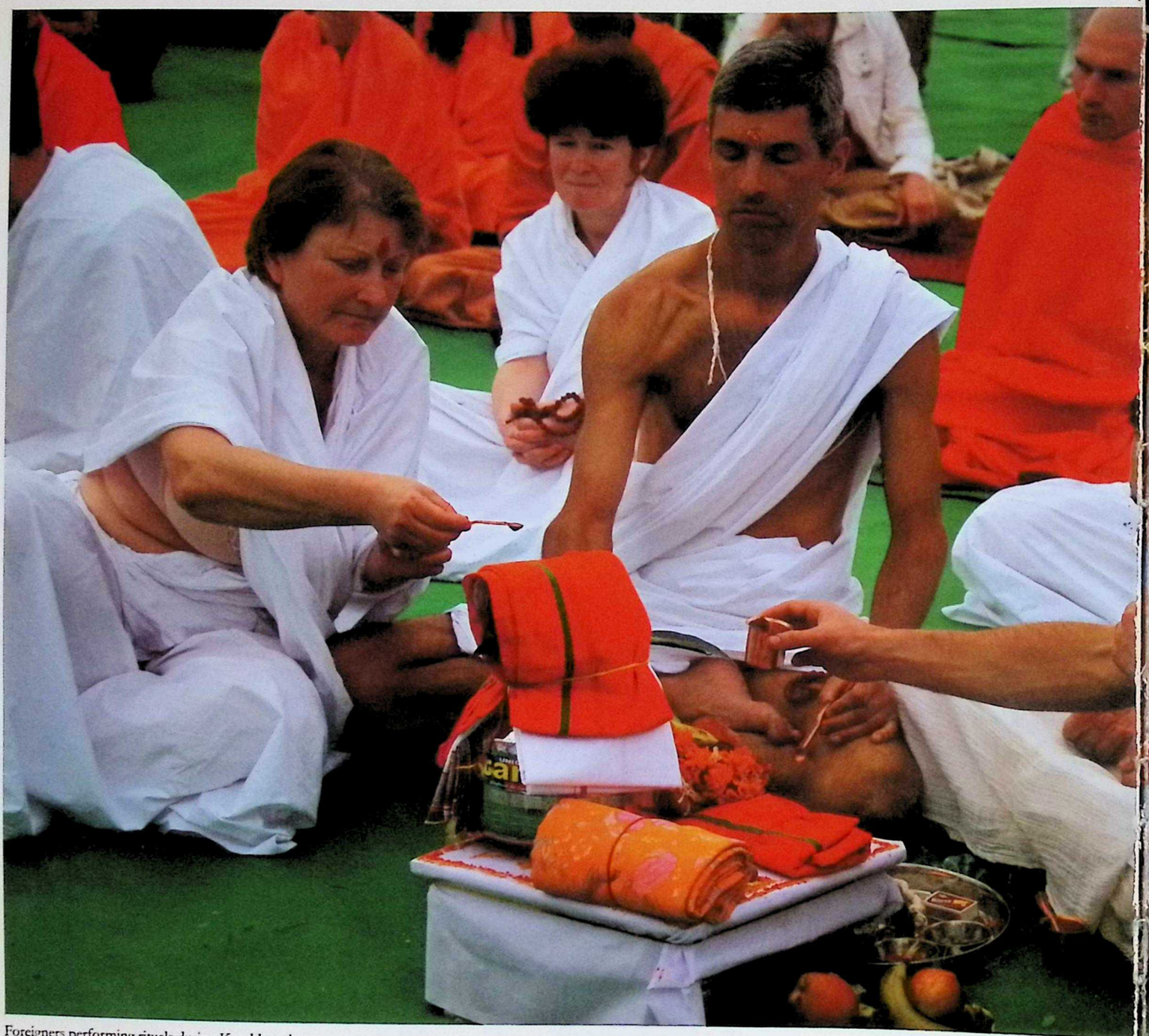

Foreigners performing rituals during Kumbh mela

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The Hallmarks of Kumbh Mela

The grand exhibition at Kumbh mela displayed many interesting and ulterior facts about India. The popular game of snakes and ladders was created way back in the 13th century by eminent poet saint Gyandev. It was originally referred to as 'Mokshapat.' The ladders in the game represented virtues and the snakes symbolized vices. The game was played with 'cowrie' (small shells) and dices. Later with the passage of time, the game underwent a number of reforms but the gist remains the same i.e. good deeds take us to heaven and vices throw us down into the trench of guilt and sorrows. Hence, one must always follow the path of dharma.

If Kumbh Snan acts as a ladder on the path to immortality, it also helps visitors revive their 'dharmic' (righteousness) and 'adhyatmik' (spiritual) virtues keeping them away from vices of adharma (non-righteous). Chess (Shataranja or AshtaPada) was also invented in India many centuries ago.

Sanskrit- Mother of all languages

Kumbh mela saw conglomeration of varied cultures, languages, ethnicities. Many foreigners were seen attracted to the language and displayed keen interest in learning the basics. Sanskrit language is actually the mother of all the European languages.

"It is the most suitable language for computer software" says a report in Forbes magazine, July 1987.

Ayurveda- The Oldest School of Medicine

Ayurveda, the earliest school of medicine known to humans seemed to be a major crowd puller at Kumbh exhibition. Forgotten and shelved aside for a long time with inclination of modern society towards latest western developments, Ayurveda is now regaining its rightful place at a fast pace in our civilization. Charaka, the father of medicine consolidated Ayurveda 2500 years ago. Sushruta is the father of surgery. Almost 2600 years ago he and many health scientists of his time conducted complicated surgeries such as cesareans, cataract, artificial limbs, fractures,urinary stones and even plastic surgery and brain surgery. Usage of anesthesia was well known in ancient India. More than 125 surgical equipments were used. Deep knowledge of anatomy, physiology, etiology, embryology, digestion, metabolism, genetics and immunity has also been proved in many texts.

Astronomy

In astronomy, India leads all other nations of the world and organizes mega events based on the same, Kumbh mela being the best example. Bhaskaracharya calculated the time taken by the earth to orbit sun hundreds of years before the astronomer Smart did. Time taken by earth to orbit the sun: (5th century) 365.258756484 days. The art of navigation was born in the river Sindh region 6000 years ago. The term 'Navigation' is derived from Sanskrit word 'NAVGATIH'. The word navy is also derived from Sanskrit 'Nou'.

"Many of the advances in the sciences that we consider today to have been made in Europe were in fact made in India many centuries ago," said Grant Duff, British Historian of India. Although modern images of India often show poverty and lack of development, India was the richest country on earth until the time of British invasion in the early 17th Century.

"If there is one place on the face of earth where all the dreams of living men have found a home from the very earliest days when man began the dream of existence, it is India," said the famous French scholar Romain Rolland.

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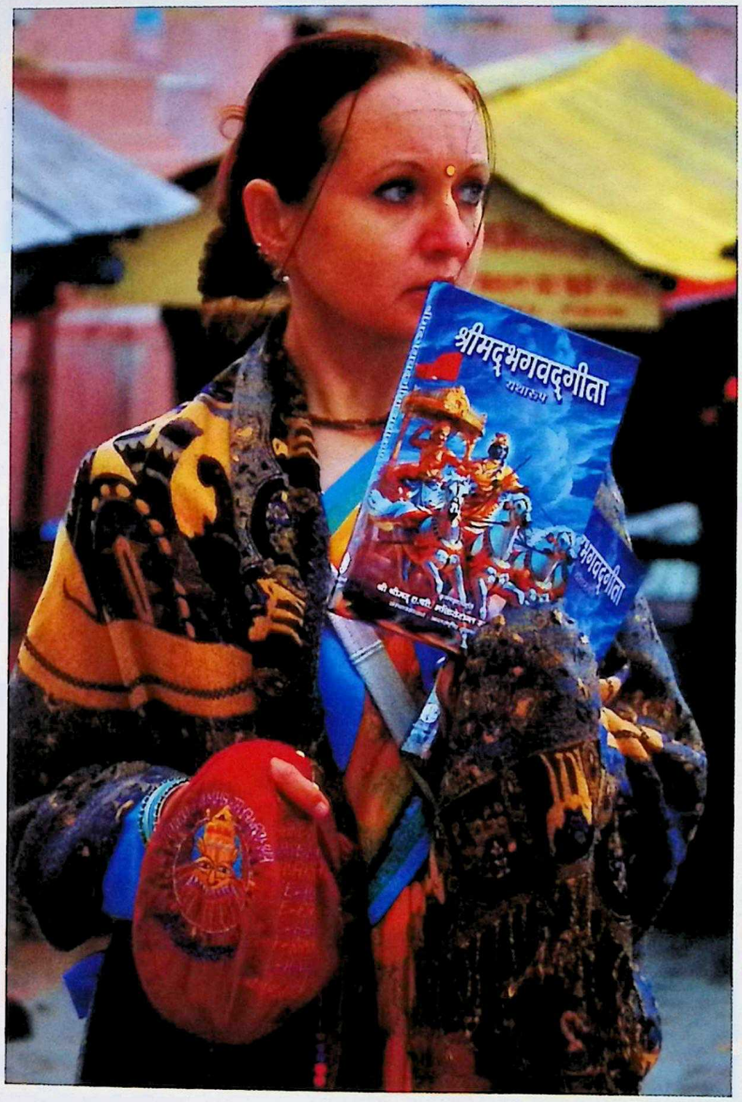

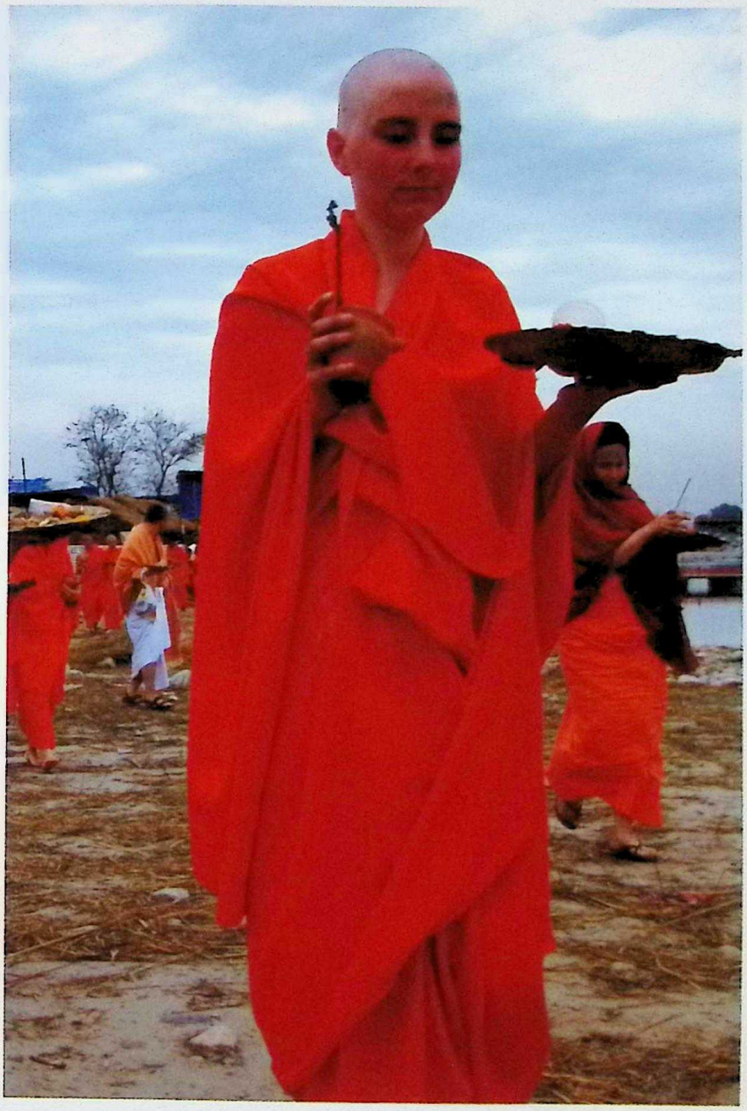

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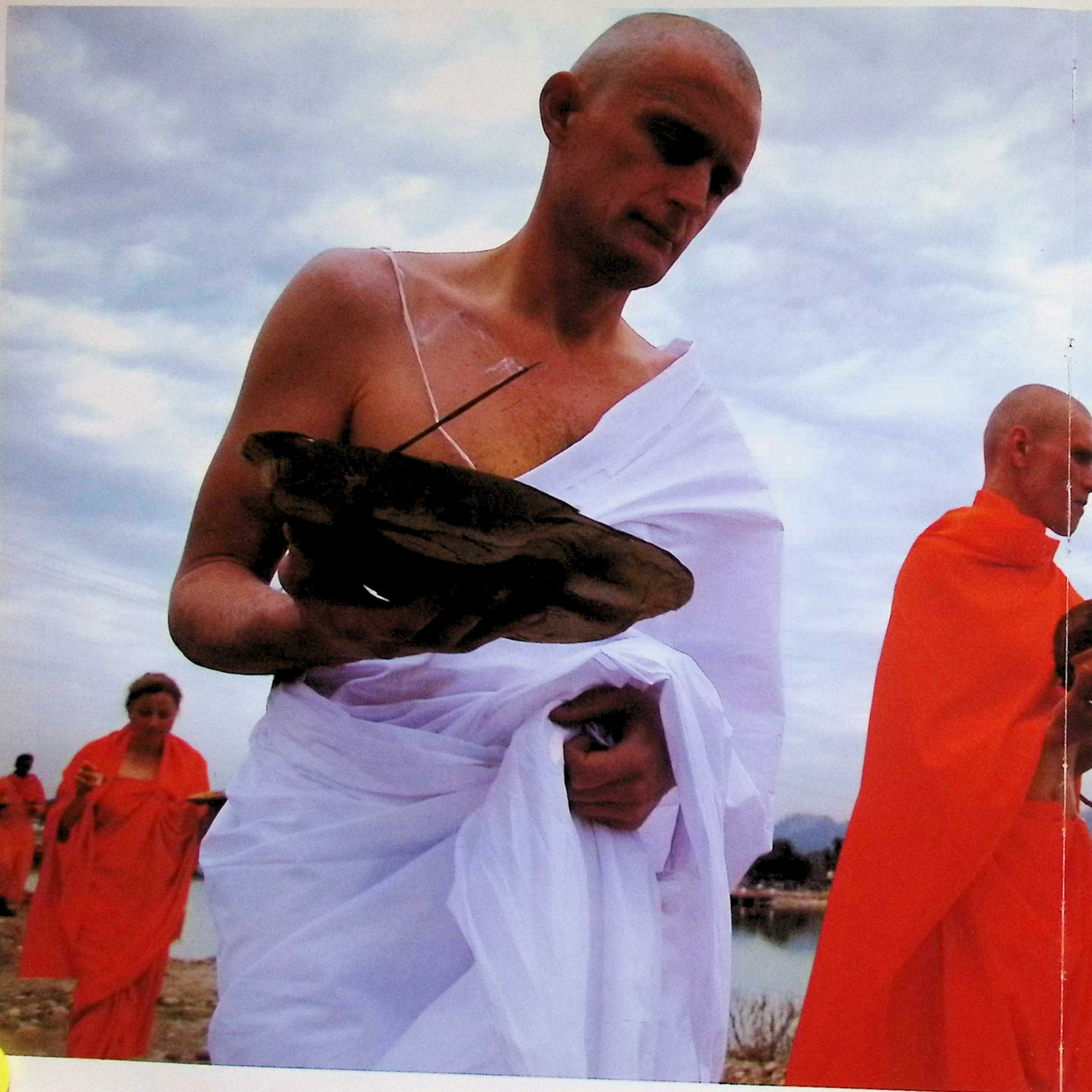

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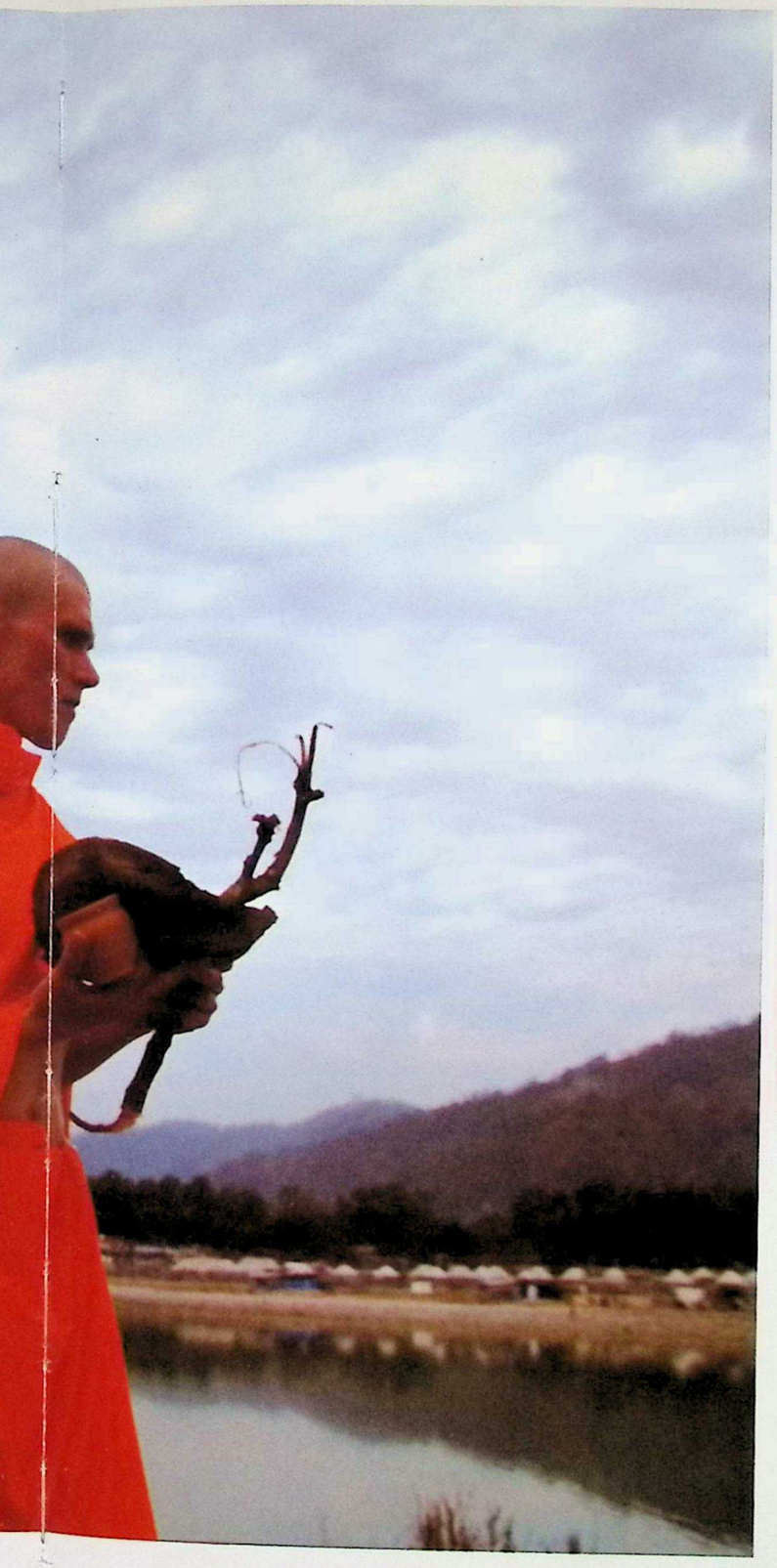

Above: Foreigner dressed in traditional Indian attire at one of the camps in Kumbh Nagar

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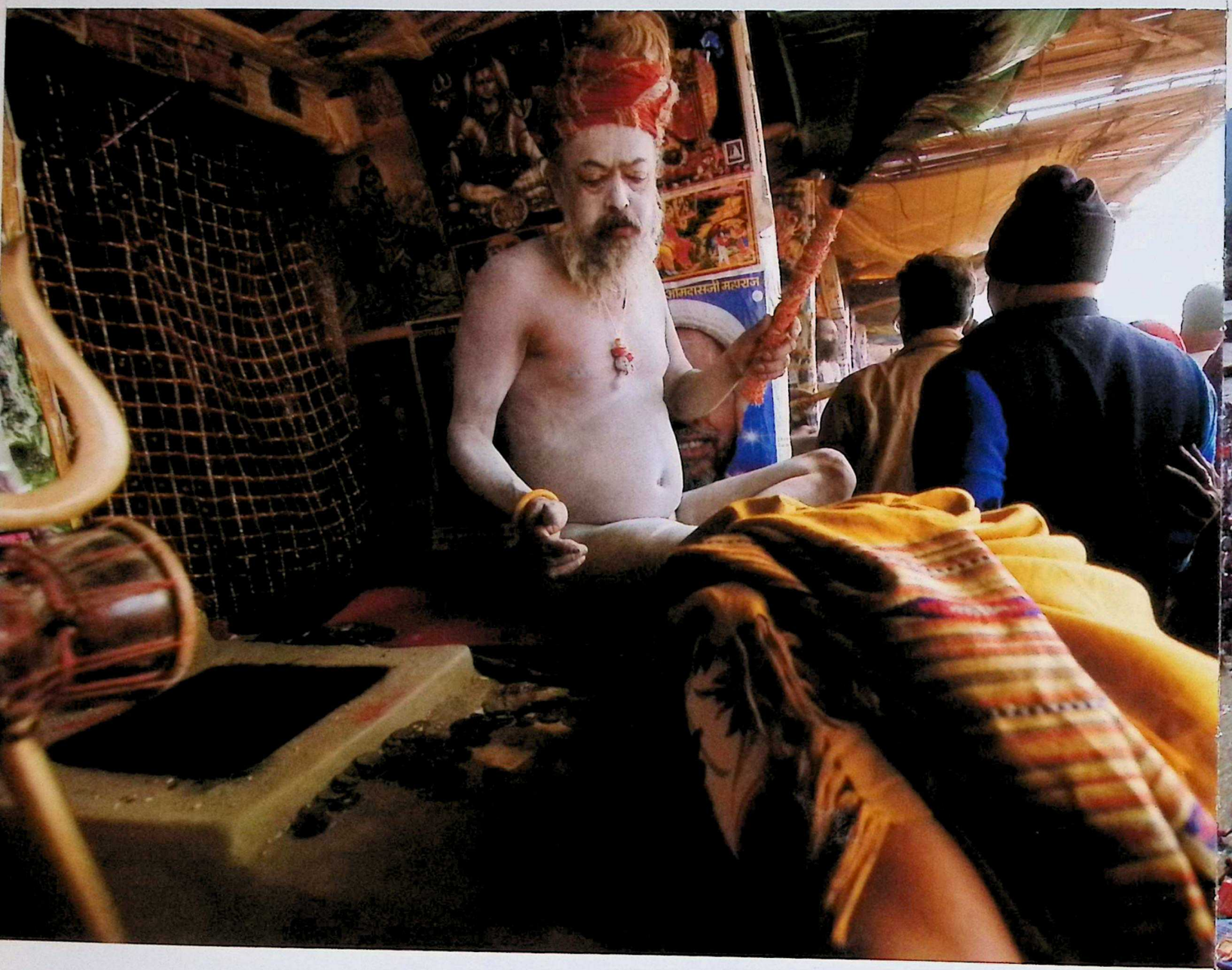

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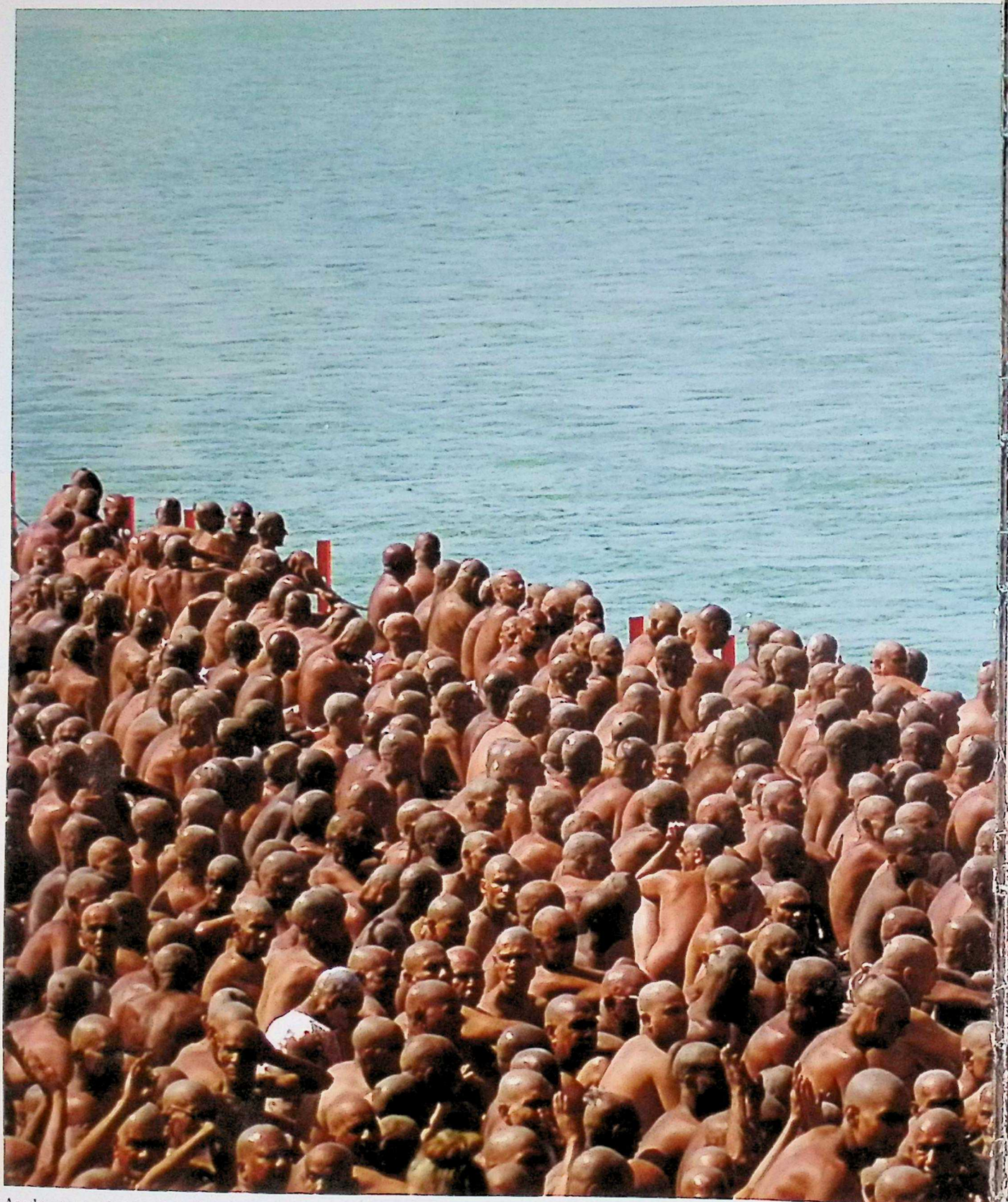

Another panoramic view of newly initiated nagas after ceremonials

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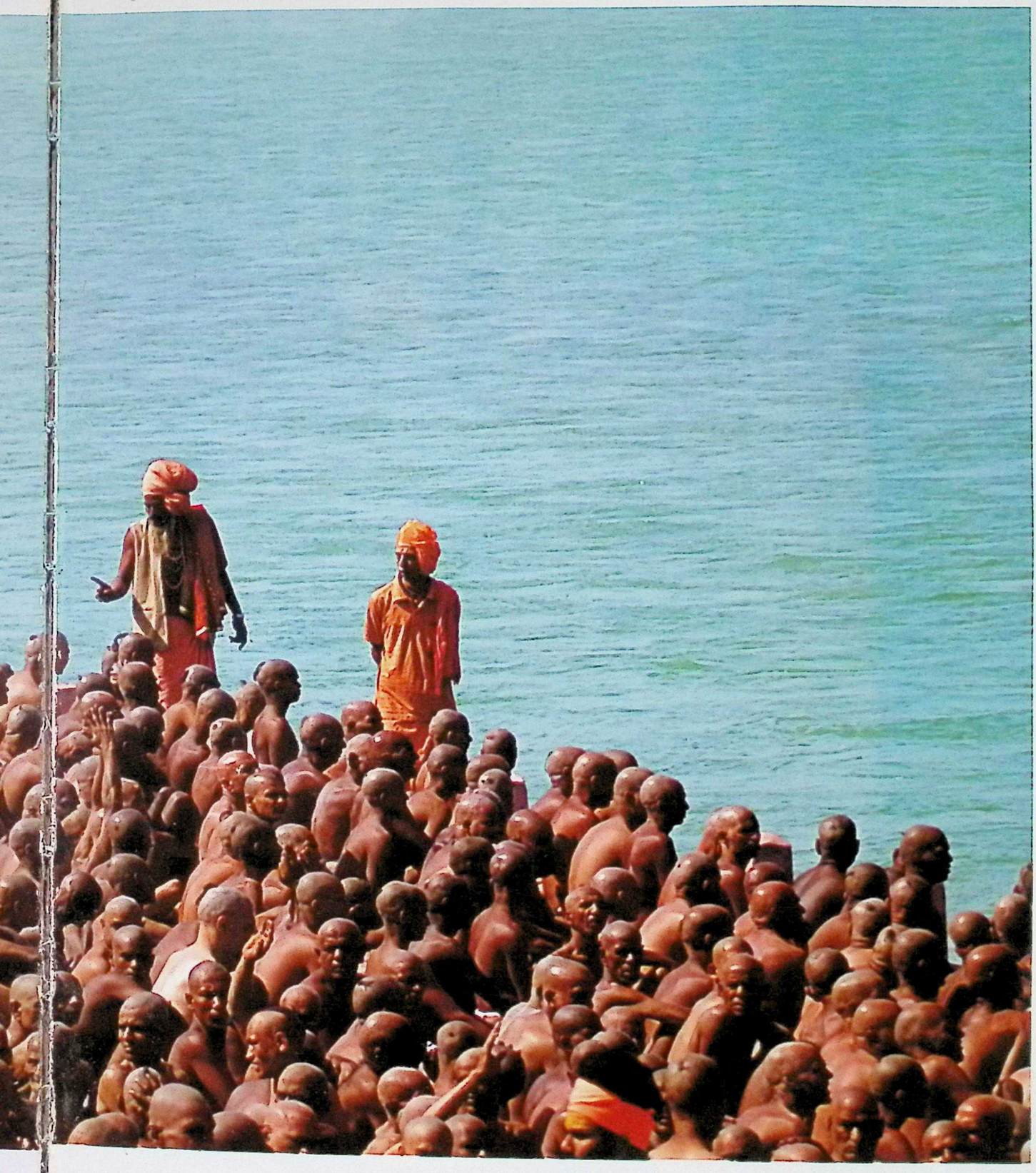

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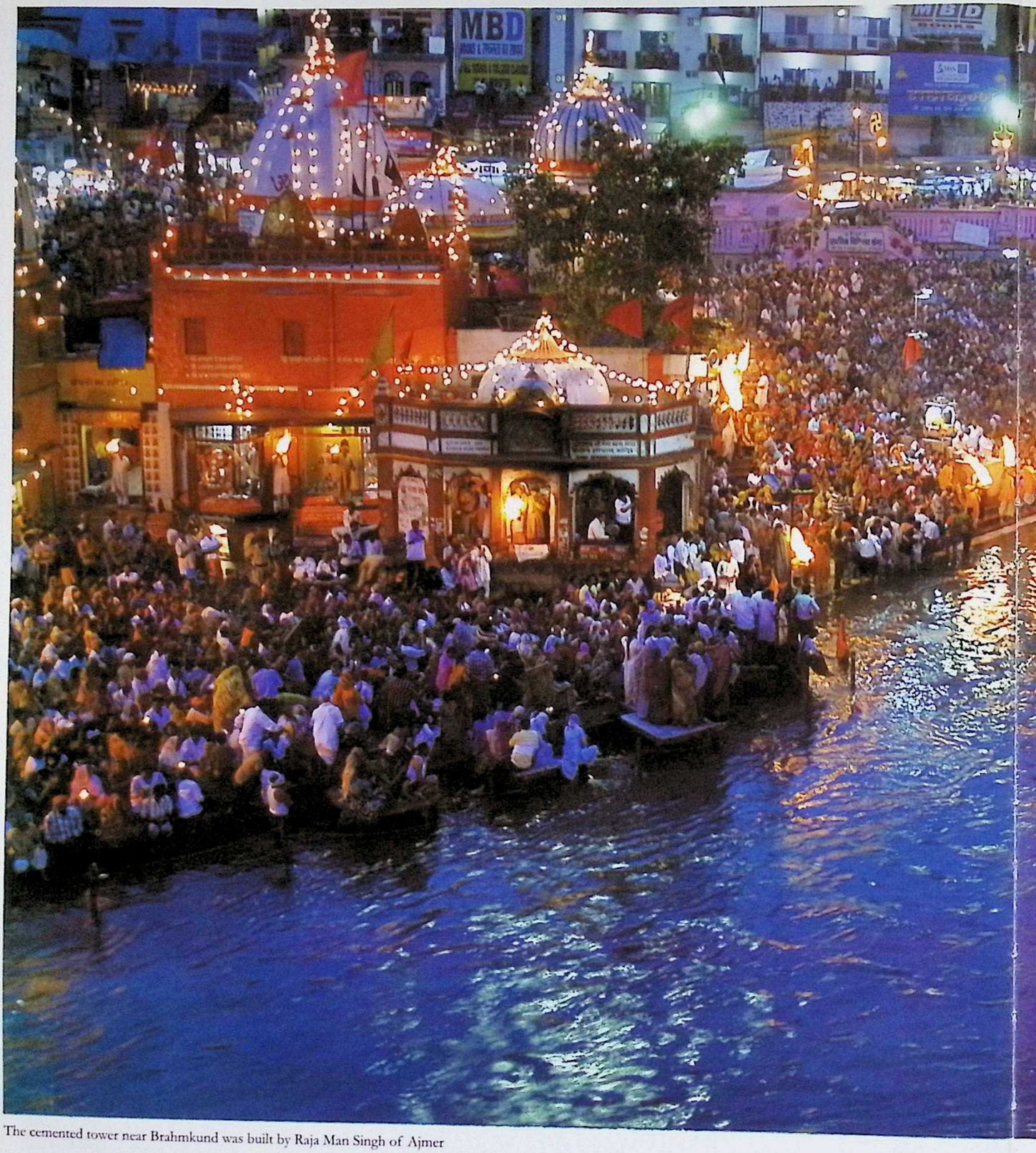

The cemented tower near Brahmkund was built by Raja Man Singh of Ajmer

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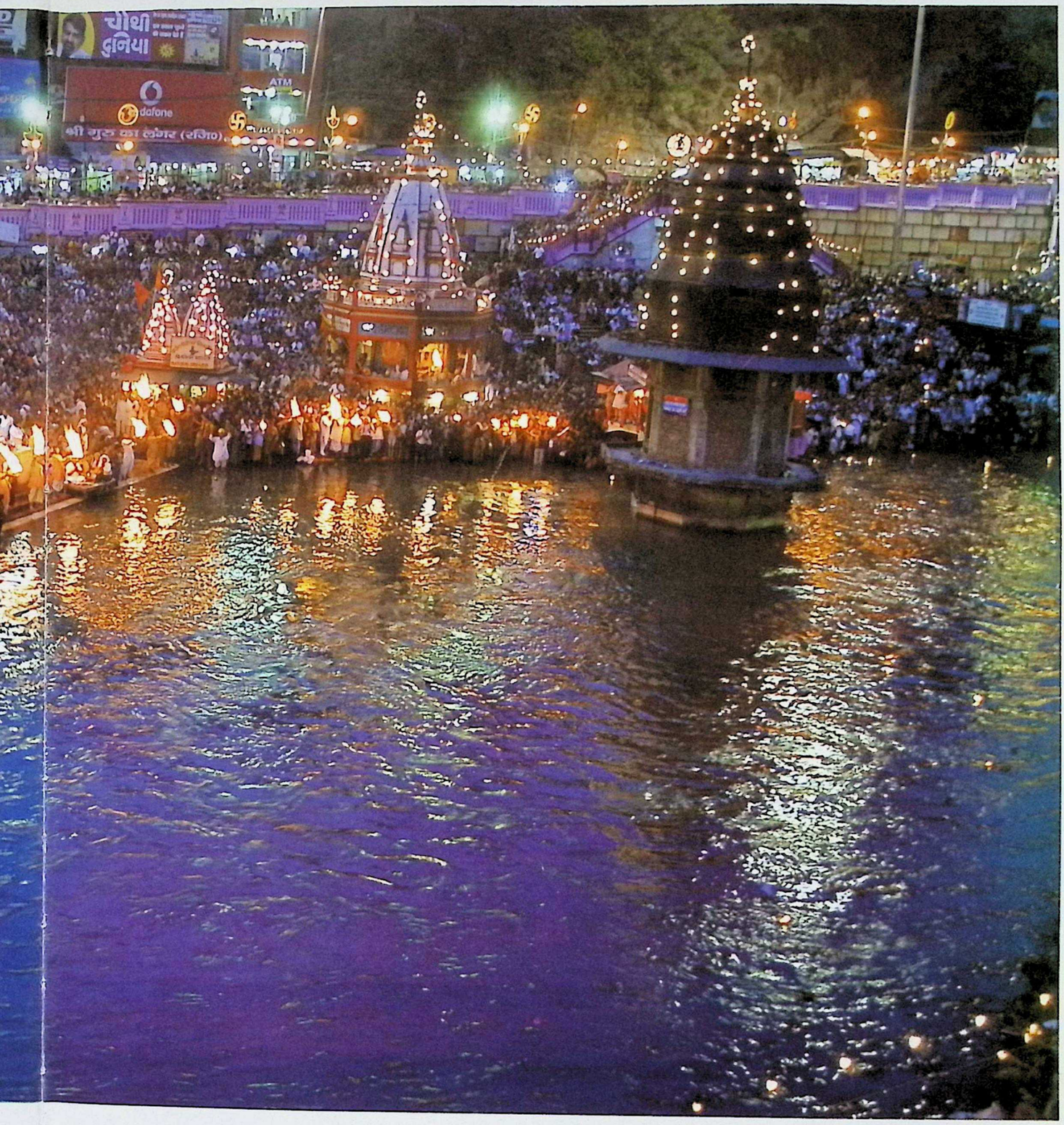

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Haridwar Maha Kumbh Galore on International Media

A bouquet of Oscar winners is working together on a Hindi-English film being made in India. Hollywood heavyweight, Russell Crowe, who has been in and out of India lately, is all set to play a middle-aged German writer who travels to the Kumbh mela to attain moksha and falls in love with a 21-year-old Bengali girl.

Sudipto Sen (of 'The Last Monk' and 'Akhnoor' fame) is directing this Crowe-starrer as a bilingual. In Hindi, it will be titled 'Amrit Kumbh'. In English, the movie will be titled 'In Search of Immortality'. As per sources, Crowe will speak in English in the Hindi version as well.

The Media Speak

"If there is one place and event in the world where you can work 20 hours non-stop and enjoy every bit of it despite extreme cold or heat and incredibly large crowd that is Kumbh mela. The warmth it holds, the colours it displays and such diverse cultures in one place, it was truly a collective consciousness of humanity. It was so universal. Yet so personal an experience, the Kumbh mela at Haridwar that was held in 2010," said Explore Media Centre Pvt Ltd of Delhi which has shot the Kumbh mela for Discovery Channel.

The documentary succeeds in spreading the message of peace, the very soul of Kumbh mela to the masses all over the country and world at large.

Programmes aired on Kumbh 2010:

On April 18, 2010, a popular American morning show 'The CBS Sunday Morning' gave an extensive coverage on Haridwar's Kumbh mela. The program titled 'The Largest Pilgrimage on Earth' referred the festivity in India as 'one of the most extraordinary displays of faith on earth, a spectacular journey drawing tens of millions of people'.

On April 28, 2010, BBC reported an audio and a video report on Kumbh mela, titled 'Kumbh –Mela the greatest show on earth.'

The supremacy of India is palpable in the words of an American historian, Will Durant, who says, *'India was the motherland of our race and Sanskrit the mother of Europe's languages. India was the mother of our philosophy, of much of our mathematics, of the ideals embodied in Christianity... of self-government and democracy. In many ways, Mother India is the mother of us all."*

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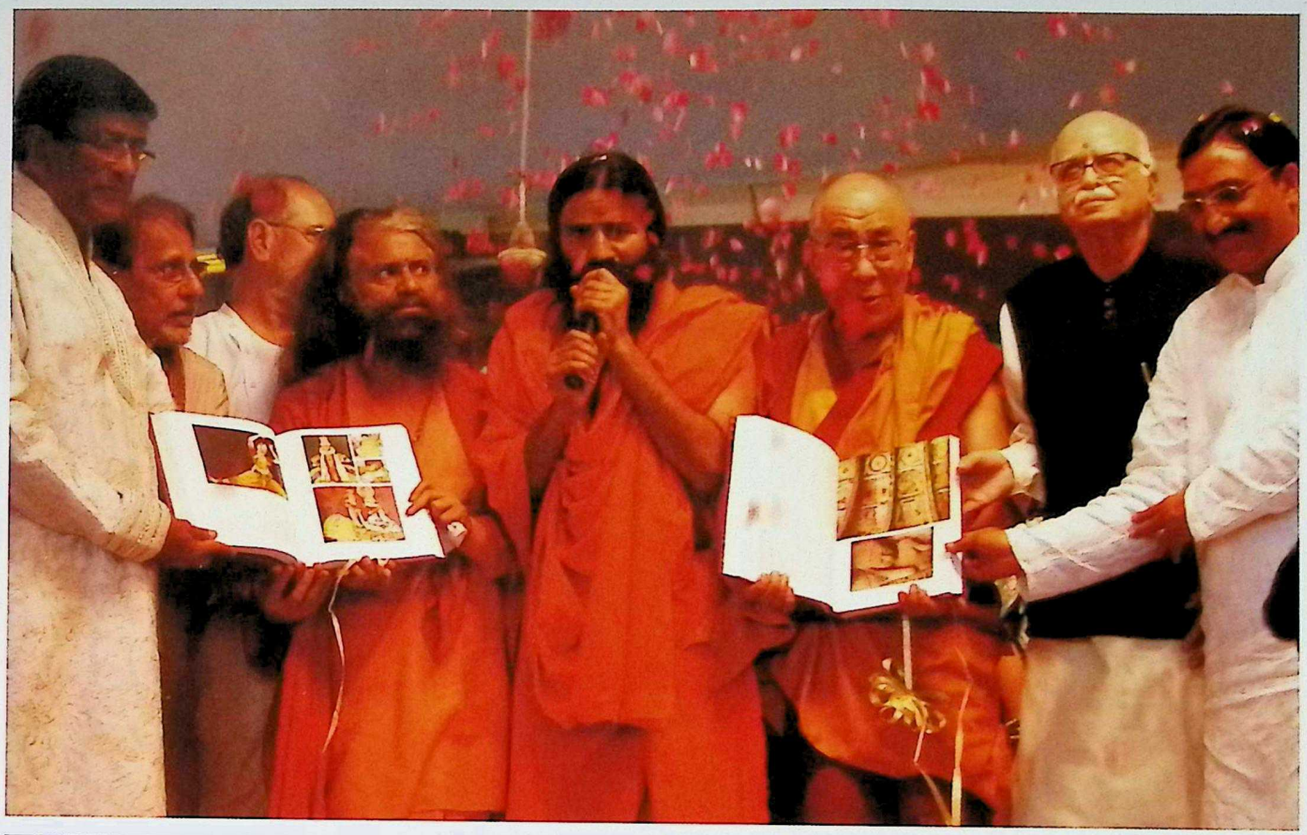

Above: Night scene at Har ki Pauri illuminated Goddess Ganges idol

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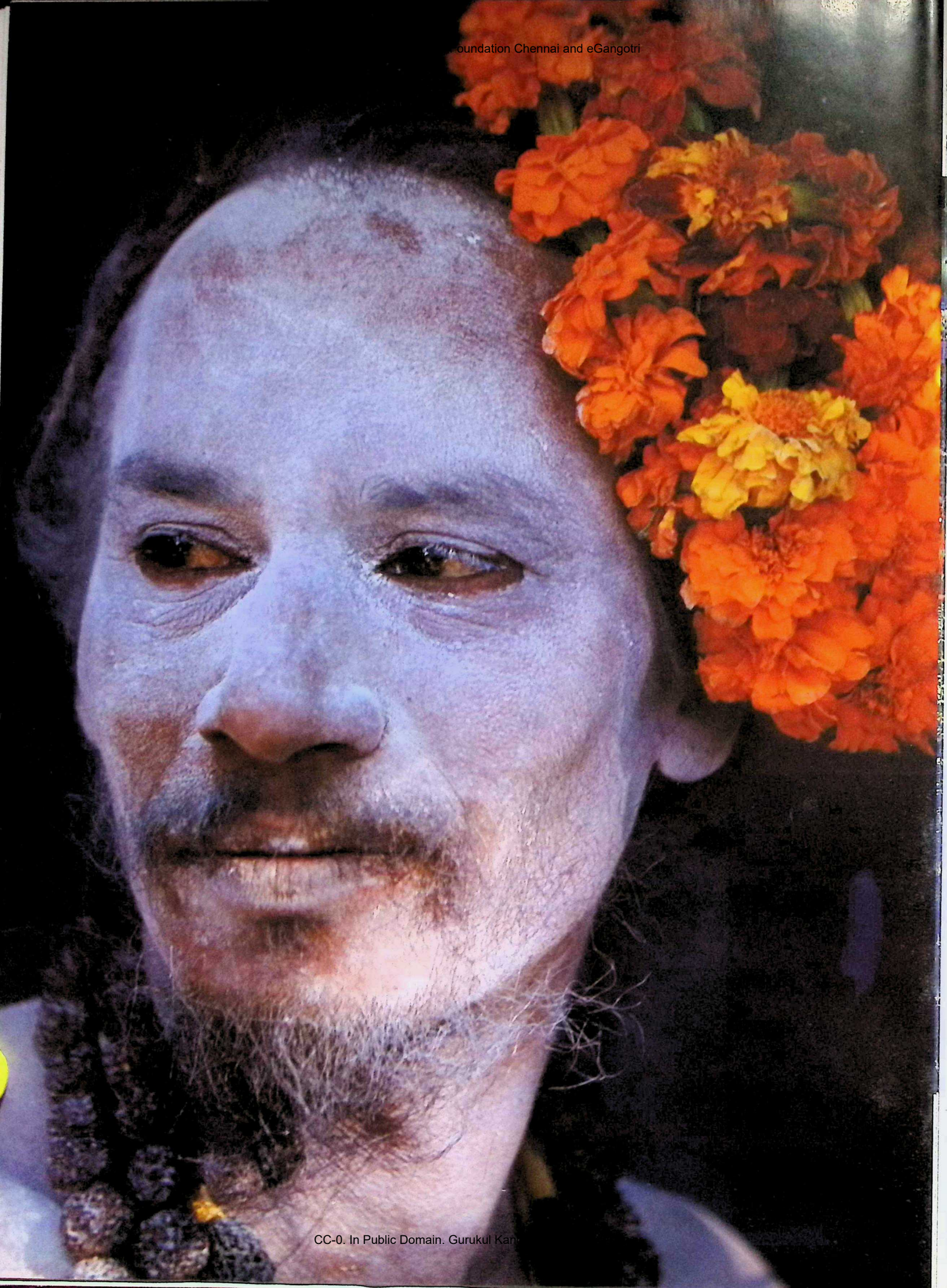

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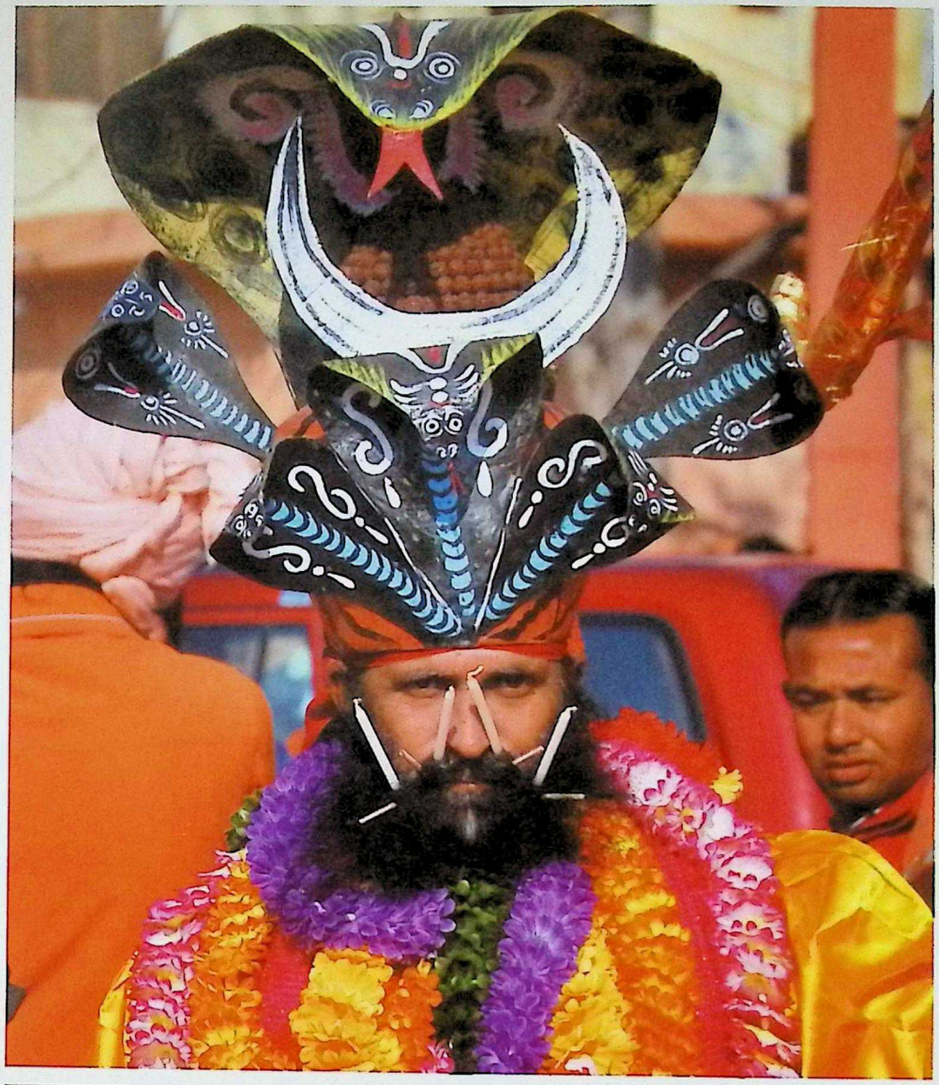

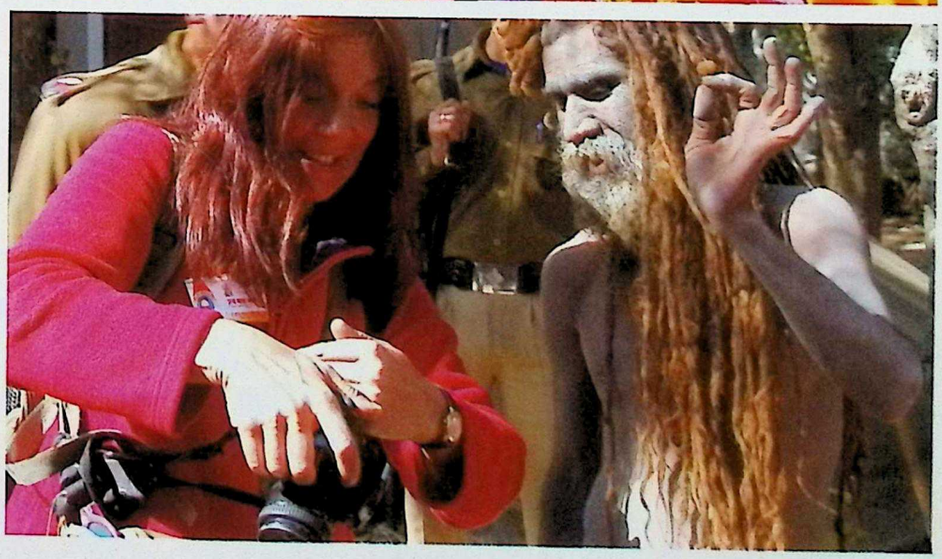

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Devotees dressed up as gods and a foreigner media person on job

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CM SPEAKS

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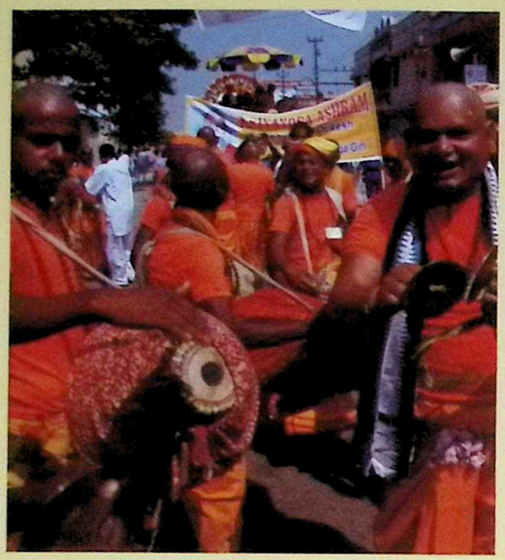
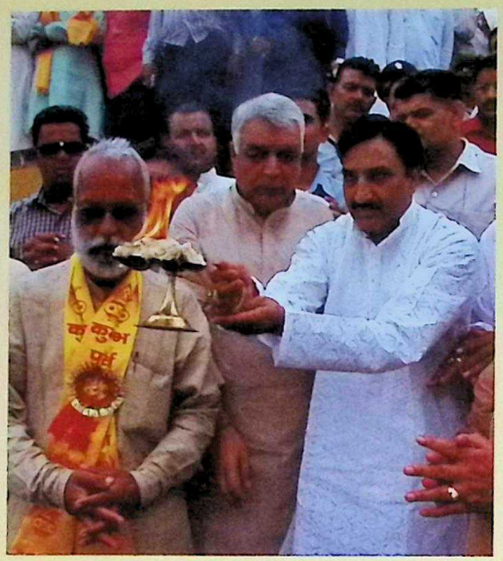
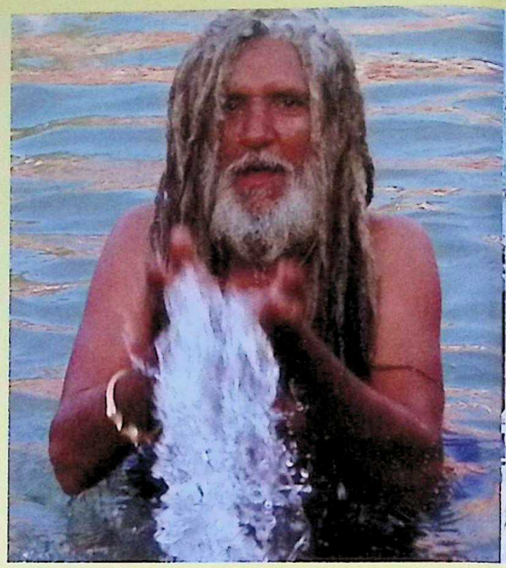

Chief Minister on the Grandeur of Kumbh Mela

(This interview was conducted in two parts – before and after Kumbh mela)

"No invitations, no advertisements, still a crowd of humanity gathers to get the internal and external peace. Isn't it amazing!"

The Preparation for Mahakumbh Mela

The chief minister inaugurated the state of the art, Media Centre on 12th Jan, 2010 at Neel Dhara Camp. It was for the first time that such a facility was being provided to cover the Kumbh mela.

Public Amenities

Around 6 permanent base hospitals had been constructed and 20 temporary 10-bed hospitals and 19 Primary Health Centres had also been constructed for the occasion. Some 264 health officials and 50 ambulances had been deployed for the Kumbh. In 1998, only 6000 temporary toilets were constructed, but during this Kumbh, the government was even more alert towards sanitation issues, therefore more than 14,000 temporary toilets had been constructed, so far. Out of these, 4000 toilets were of semi-permanent nature.

More than 7.50 kms of bathing ghats had been constructed for the devotees, out of which 1.3 kms bathing ghats were of semi-permanent nature, which would be upgraded permanently after the Kumbh. More than one crore devotees were benefitted from these ghats during the Kumbh mela.

For drinking water, the storage capacity had been increased to 106 MLD from 63 MLD, which was an achievement in itself. More than 7 tubewells, 11 High Quality Reservoirs and 46 kms of pipeline had been laid on non-permanent basis.

More than 90 kms of road were upgraded. As the weather improved, more roads would be upgraded in the near future is the assurance given by CM. He also said that the closed hill bye-pass had been reopened, which was also an achievement for the government. To avoid traffic jams at Laksar, a railway overbridge is being constructed and, apart from that, 5 other bridges had been constructed.

A permanent bridge had been constructed near Dhanauri, to usher in the traffic from Saharanpur to Haridwar, NH 58 and NH 74 had been joined with the help of bridges. The parking capacity had also been increased as compared to the 1998 Kumbh. This was spread across 300 hectares at 45 places. The capacity of this parking was for more than 1 lakh vehicles.

A permanent power connection of 147 MVA had also been installed with three additional sub-stations, 5 transformers and 38 kms of line. To prevent pollution, 35 kms of sewer line, 2 sewage treatment plants and 12 sewer cleaning and suction machines had been installed. More than 6 temporary ISBT and local bus stands had been added to the facilities. The government had also kept in mind the disabled persons, this time as separate toilets catering to their demands had been installed in different areas.

More than 100 acres of land had been allotted for the camp area. The holy city seemed to be a blend of village and city infrastructure during Kumbh mela. Interspersed with housing structures and newly built multi storeyed flats were seen, tents of different varieties doting the city skyline. In areas like Kankhal, Shivlok, Hill by pass road, Kumbh mela administration built tents for officials of different departments like Health, Police, Sector Magistrate, Hydel, the most fascinating being special types of tents underway for foreign tourists.

"The successful conduct of the Mahakumbh fair has been the utmost priority of my government, for which heavy security has been put in place," said the Chief Minister Nishank. "All arrangements have been

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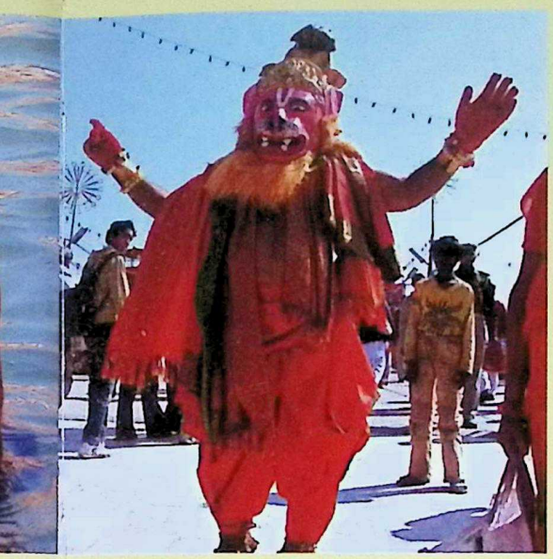

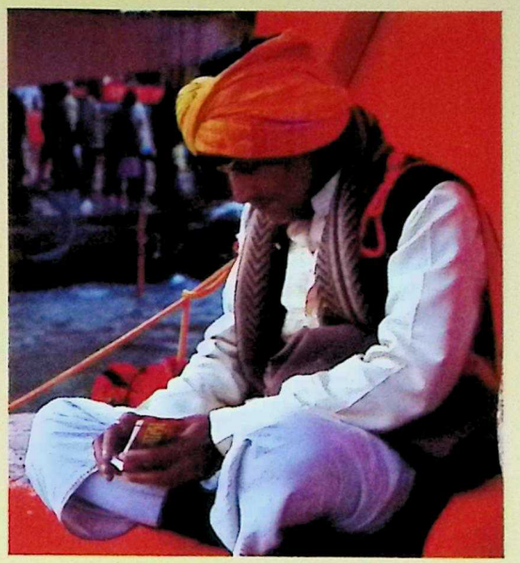

made. Security forces have been deployed at 130 sq km area and its extensions to ensure that no untoward incident occurs," deliberated Anand Bardhan, Kumbh mela incharge.

Security Cover

Around 39 CCTV cameras were installed to keep a close vigil. Around 800 CRPF personnel, 200 RAF personnel and 400 CISF men have been deployed on the first day of the Kumbh Mela, said Alok Sharma, a senior police official.

BSF and ITBP personnel were also deployed in sensitive areas of 'Har Ki Pauri'. The security was stepped up along the Delhi-Haridwar national highway and 17 new police outposts have been set up. Dehradun, Pauri, Tehri and Haridwar regions of Uttarakhand have been notified as Mahakumbh Nagar. The administration called upon the public to keep away from the routes of sadhus going for snans. To avoid any fit of anger from the renunciants and akhara naga sadhus, media personnel were given a space at Malviya dweep for shooting purposes.

Movement of all kinds of vehicles on the 'peshwai route' was completely restricted and according the special traffic plan, the routes were diverted. Along with the senior police officials, mela DIG Alok Sharma used to inspect all the routes a day before the peshwai. The peshwai path was divided into 4 sectors and every sector had its own sub inspector. For the traffic management of the peshwai, 8 raj patrit officers, 6 inspectors, 33 darogas, 20 senior policemen, 278 arakshi, 15 traffic policemen, 2 PAC companies, 4 RAF companies and anti-riot squad were deputed.

Managing pilgrim rush during Kumbh mela was not an easy task for security forces. Keeping this in view, a Kumbh-oriented course for an efficient execution of Kumbh duty was prepared for para-military forces stationed in the holy city. Apart from managing huge crowds running into millions, global terrorism threat perception and maintaining sanctity of the Kumbh traditions while carrying out duty put a lot of pressure on security personnel deployed in the Kumbh zone.

A specific program was chalked out for the security personnel focusing on the situations and incidents that a jawan encounters in Haridwar. The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) 41st Batallion-06 Company and Rapid Action Force (RAF) 106-107 battalions underwent this training-cum-acquaintance program.

Seminars for Security Officers

The program included seminars conducted by experts from various fields to acquaint these personnel with Kumbh rituals and the socio-geographical conditions of Haridwar. The history of the Maha Kumbh and Ardh Kumbh and their cultural-religious aspects were illustrated during the program, followed by the role of akharas in the Kumbh. The program also emphasized the role the mela police have to play during the mega fair and how to have a better co-ordination with various state forces. Since majority of the mela police personnel belonged to different states and were not well acquainted with the Kumbh, it was imperative to train them in such a way that they performed efficiently.

"Kumbh duty comes with several attached aspects and it's not only about maintaining security but also about crowd management, showing respect to traditions, akharas and saints' role in the Kumbh, guiding outside pilgrims, foreigners as well as maintaining minimum inconvenience to the locals," say the senior officials.

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Chief Minister on Kumbh mela as a fest of peace...

"Kumbh mela is the biggest ever event taking place on earth in the direction of world peace. It can be referred to as a 'fest of peace' in which millions of people gather at the banks of Ganga just to get the feel and touch of its holy waters without caring for comforts and safety of their lives. Haridwar Kumbh mela of the year 2010 proved beyond doubt that 8.5 crore people congregated at one place and stayed for four months in quest of immortality and peace. It proved to be a fest of love and universal brotherhood."

A fest of universal brotherhood...

"No other testimonial of unity, unanimity and feel-good factor can be found elsewhere in the world where people rise above the differences of religion and caste and spend time together sharing thoughts, food and shelter and elevate themselves spiritually. No one ranks the other as superior or inferior while taking a holy dip. Breaking all the shackles of differences, crossing the boundaries of religions, Kumbh mela united the humanity in a unique bond of love and peace. It became a colossal congregation of peace, unity and selflessness. India itself is a nation of 28 different languages and multiple cultures. Kumbh 2010 saw mingling of hues of not only these diverse cultures from India but also from 140 countries across the globe. The mantra of 'Sangachdhwam, samvaddhvam' (coming together, speaking together, sharing together) comes alive in the grand fair.

On managing a magnanimous fair...

"To systematize the fair, best available ultra-modern equipments and systems were utilized. Cleanliness, security and traffic management during the fair were the main challenges before the state government. Since terrorism being the biggest threat today worldwide, security of the visitors became the biggest challenge for us. We had received open threats from four different places during the conduct of the fair. To counter the same, a network of communication was developed in the whole of Kumbh Nagar.

Information to the precision of a second was available at the control room. Ample arrangements were made such that if there was some sort of disturbance in a particular area, it could be tackled there itself without spreading to other areas. I believe that if millions of people can be managed without manning them with rod or firearm and police officials pleading the pilgrims with folded hands to follow the protocols, a better example of peaceful management cannot be given. What more can be evidence to the fact that crores of people became emblems of peace breathing in discipline and making it a memorable event?

With commissioning of hundreds of lost and found booths and police help desks, administration minimized the chances of untoward incidents during the fair. To assess the security arrangements chartered by the police department, I personally visited the strategic locations in the thick of the night in a common man's guise. I did not implement it until fully convinced of the efficacy of the system.

For the first time in the history of Kumbh mela, arrangements were made so that from a specially raised platform at Har Ki Pauri, all world media gathered could capture the glimpse of the religious extravaganza without offending the religious sentiments of the pilgrims and the sadhus.

With a strong network of electronic media and wi-fi network, we could send messages and broadcasts to more than 100 countries. A media centre was established with ultra modern facilities and I deputed my officer, Dr Ashok Sharma, on special duty for five months who catered to the needs of the international media ensuring security checks.

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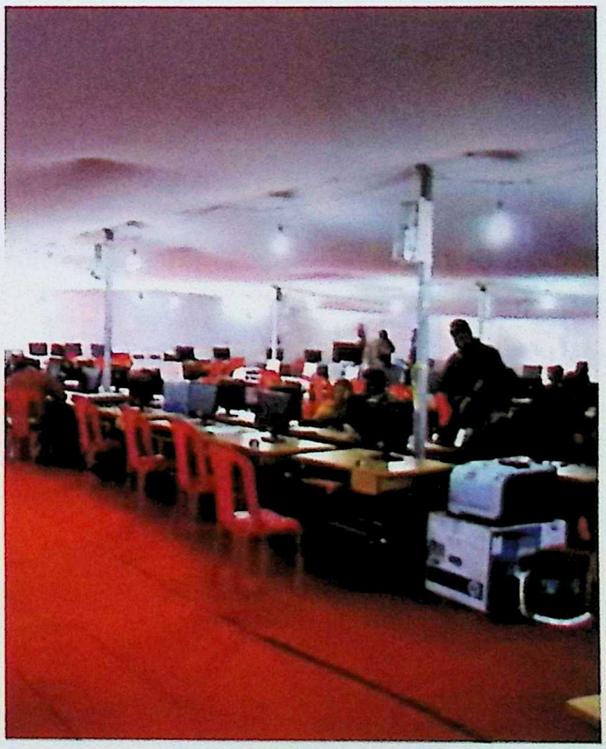

Top: National chief of BJP Nitin Gadkari along with CM of Uttarakhand offer prayers at Ganges river for successful completion of mahakumbh festival 2010.
Above: State of art media centre established during MahaKumbh Festivals 2010 was operational round the clock.

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From a sweeper to the doctor and the intelligence chief, I was in touch with my team members 24 x 7, coordinating between administration and the government. This ensured smooth running of the fair with no intelligence failure which mostly occurs in such types of grand events, even in superpower nations like US who faced attack on prestigious World Trade Centre in the past decade.

Sign language was used to the maximum to display necessary information inside Kumbh nagar to facilitate the visitors following languages."

After effects of Kumbh mela...

The Event wins Historical Stature

With the recent nuclear disaster triggered by natural calamities like Tsunami and devastative earthquakes in March 2011 in Japan, threat looms today on earth and all the countries of the world look forward to the ancient techniques of India like yajna for the aversion of these disasters. Further as per the prediction of scientists, X-rays and UV radiation emitted by solar flares can affect Earth's ionosphere and disrupt long-range radio communications presenting radiation hazards to spacecrafts, astronauts and cosmonauts. That there is a correlation between Earth's lunar cycle and deviant behavior in human beings has also been established since long.

Now more and more countries are adapting to the yajna techniques. Burning cow dung cakes around the nuclear reactor is believed to nullify the effect of disastrous radiations within a span of four to five days. Due to the chemical reaction, the nuclear gases released from reactors are converted to water as soon as they come in contact with fumes generated by burning cow dung cakes.

There are two basic energy systems in the physical world: heat and sound. During the ritual of performing yagna, these two energies, namely; the heat from yagna's fire and the sound of the chanting of the Gayatri and other Vedic Mantras, are blended together to achieve the desired physical, psychological and spiritual benefits. The fumigation, vaporization and sublimation of specific substances in the yagna-fire constitute a verifiable scientific method of matter and expansion sublimation of its colloidal state. This generates ions and energy with positive effects in the surrounding atmosphere through the specific sonic waves of the mantras.

Kumbh mela of 2010 became the legendary fair wherein the history of mankind was written by millions offering prayers for the world peace and unity at the sanctum sanctorum. Mantra of 'sarve bhavantu sukhinah sarve santu niramaya' (May all be peaceful and disease free) echoed loud and clear by the saints and followers of diverse religions. The flames and fumes arising from yajna fires sanctified the atmosphere.

State of Uttarakhand Shines Forth

After the successful conduct of this Kumbh mela, people's attraction towards the state of Uttarakhand has increased multifold. People across the world realized that there is some power in the place. After all, more than 1.5 crore people congregate at one place on a single day and everything is accomplished in peaceful manner. Nearly 8 times the original population of Uttarakhand floated during the Kumbh fair of 108 days.

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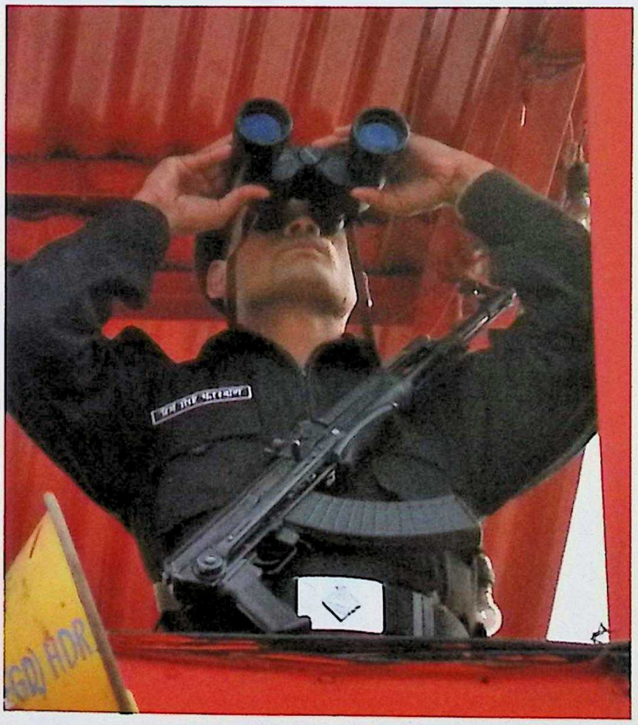

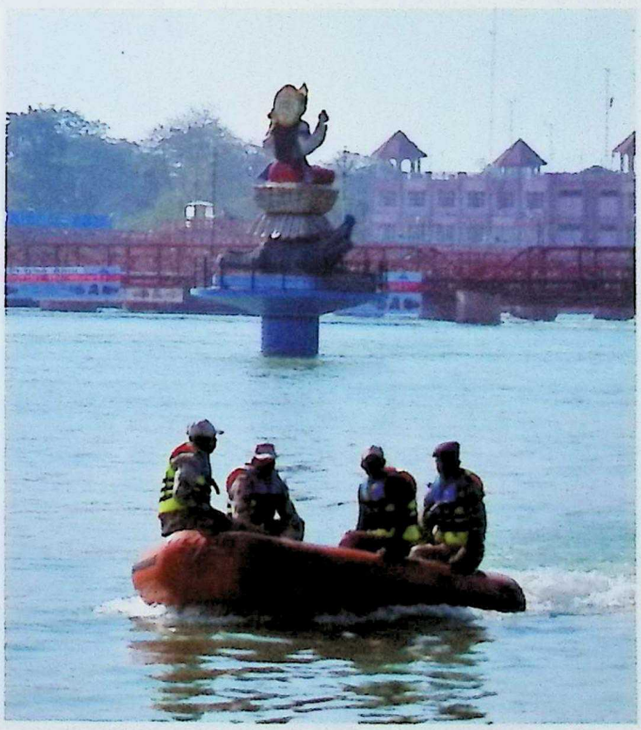

Monitoring the activities. (clockwise)
Former Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani with his family and chief Minister Dr. Nishank. A Security personal watching the CCTV monitors. Another personnel keeping on eye on the bathing area and water police pertroling in the deep waters

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Uttarakhand state is a heaven on earth blessed with bounties of nature in the form of natural reserves, mounts and vales; valley of flowers, holy Ganga and grand Himalayas to name a few. Whosoever comes to this place is bound to become part and parcel of its treasured being. Wherever you go a congregation of spiritual power exists. As one ascends in the Himalayan region after Rishikesh, the entire region is considered as 'Tapobhumi' or the place of asceticism. A follower of any religion finds that his or her deity of worship is conserved in this state of Uttarakhand. The holy vibrations and serene aura is palpable in these regions. This has led to attraction of people all around the world towards the state.

A magnificent plan is on the cards for Char dham (four pilgrimage centres) in the northern part of Himalayas. These are fully connected by chopper facility. Also plans are underway to make another 'Mahakumbh of Himalaya' for 280 km long stretch Nanda devi Rajjat pilgrimage, a global event. It is unique of its kind owing to conduct at the highest point on earth stretching from Rup Kund shrouded by mystery. The state of Uttarakhand is thus a centre of many such mysteries, faiths and fests which need to be explored. We wish to make this further a beautiful state and an abode where man can find peace and solace.

With the miraculous powers in waters of Ganga, originating from Gaumukh in Himalayas and reaching plains in Haridwar, it has gained significance amongst people of all faiths and sects. Having capacity to end hundreds of illnesses, the powerful Ganga has gained status of 'Amrit ganga' and we strive to make it available to one and all across the nations by the conduct of such mega fairs.

Chief Minister Dr Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank wished the nation on the eve of Makar Sankranti and offered his prayers to Ganga for successful completion of Mahakumbh 2010.

Effective management in all spheres was witnessed in Kumbh mela which facilitated all utilities at one place - media centre, hospital, living camps, yajana altars, processions and royal baths. With a focused approach to manage a crowd of humanity and an event at magnanimous scale, an example was set for the world in coordination of huge religious gathering.

Exemplifying unfaltering governance of a good leader who leads from the front and manages the forthcoming events in advance, Chief Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' conceptualized state-of-the-art media centre in Kumbh Nagar.

Uniting one and all- the people, the administrators, the departments and religious organizations worked with a focused aim –successful and peaceful conduct of Kumbh mela. Under the aegis of lucid and intrepid leadership of chief minister of Uttarakhand, sea of humanity from all over the world participated in this carnival of peace, making it a landmark for the generations to come.

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Top: Chief Minister of Uttarakhand launching emergency ambulance during Kumbh Festival
Middle: Kumbh festival DIG along with other administrative officials review the kumbh festival works and security measures.
Bottom: First ever state cabinet meet held at the banks of Ganges near har ki pauri by chief minister of uttarakhand Ramesh Pokhariyal Nishank.

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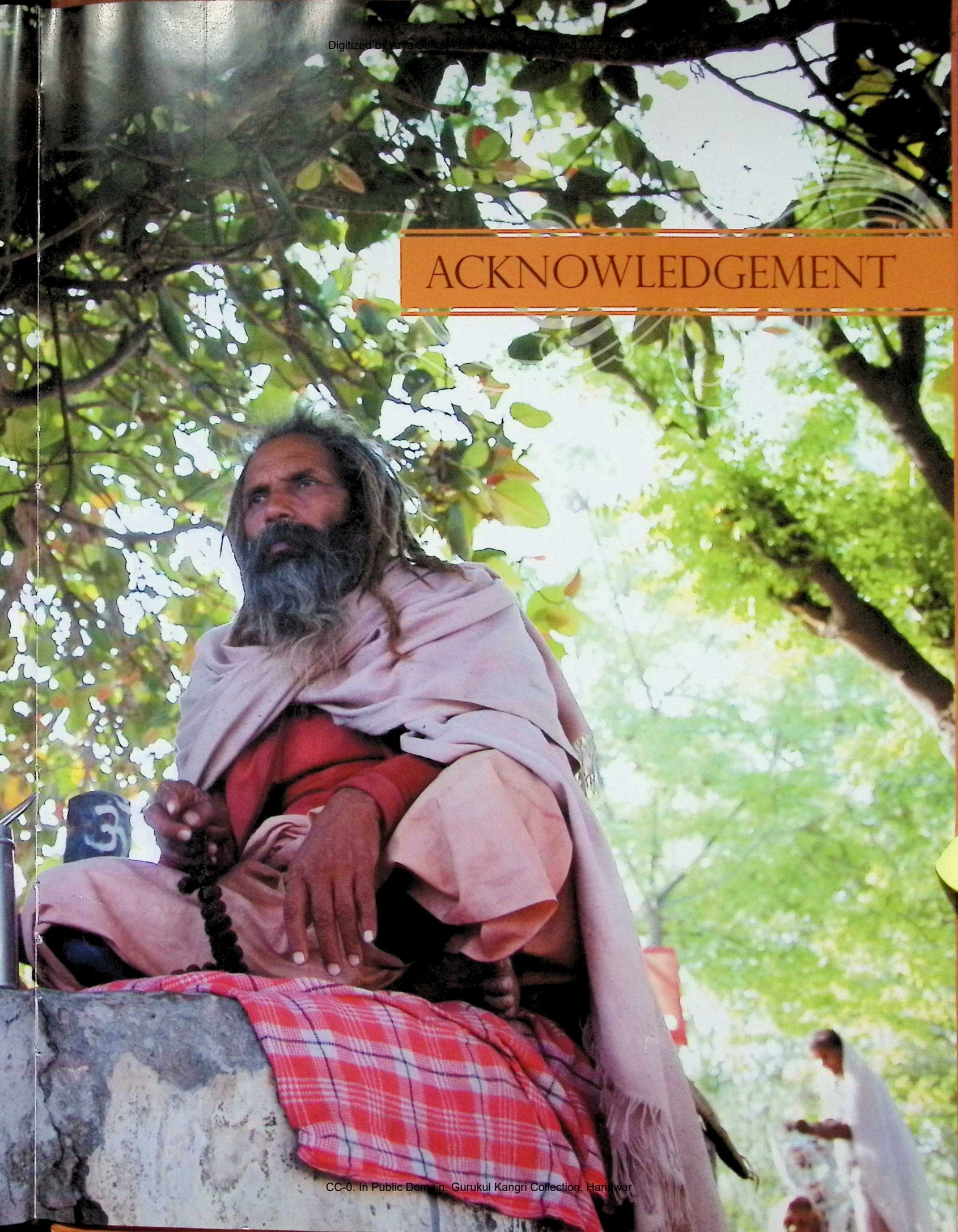

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The publication of this Coffee Table Book is the fruit of kindness of the omnipotent God and blessings of my parents, especially my mother, who accompanied me to the akhara camps of Kumbh nagar of Haridwar meeting various sadhus. A million obeisances at thy feet. The onerous task of bringing out this publication could not be completed without the assistance and blessings of the saint duo H.H Swami Ramdev and Acharya Bal Krishna, with whom I have been associated for more than a decade.

My words find no expression to thank the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand, Dr. Ramesh Pokhariyal Nishank for taking time out of his hectic schedule for reviewing the book and give his valuable comments, sharing the management lessons in organizing the mega event of the world. I am indebted to Dr Ashok Kumar Sharma, OSD to the Chief Minister and Nodal Officer Kumbh Mela, for his unflinching guidance and support on this project who acted as a friend, philosopher and guide to me and without whose support this project could never have taken its present shape.

I am very grateful to Shri Narendra Verma and his dynamic son Manish Verma who goaded me to undertake this 'kumbhian' (vastness in a pitcher) task of diving deep into Mahakumbh ocean of faith and write Mahakumbh diary of this year in the form of a book. I shall be failing in my duty if I do not mention and thank photographer Santosh Upadhyay who worked 24 x 7 during kumbh fair and did coverage of the processions and bathing days.

My gratitude to all my friends like Shreya Sharma and teachers whose names should have been included in the role of credits but for the space constraint, could not be added.

My due acknowledgement to the libraries of Gurukul Kangri, SMJN college, which gave me access to their treasure trove. My sincere thanks to Kumbh mela officer, Anand Bardhan and officials of Haridwar Development Authority who assisted me in providing factual information.

For historical data, I owe much to Shalini Saran whose book 'Ganga dwarey mahateerthey' became my ultimate source of inspiration and information.

Last but not the least, my sincere thanks to Hindustan Times group under whose banner, I could cut across the bureaucratic barriers and meet in person all those not-so-accessible stalwarts of religion. Thanks indeed to my work place, Divya Pharmacy, which provided me time and infrastructural resources in the completion of this project. My department people Chandan P Gupta and Ashwani Dhiman had been a constant support to me throughout whom I owe a lot. My special thanks to Vandana Verma, my neighbour and my guide friends Leena Bal and Maj. A P Singh who inspired me to complete the work without bothering for material gains.

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PHOTOGRAPHIC CREDITS:

Most of the photographs were taken by Santosh Upadhyay and Akshay Kaushik. Some unique photographs of religious rituals like tonsure ceremony of akhara sadhus near banks of Ganaga were taken by the author herself. Significant photographic contributions have been made by Rishi Ballabh, Rahul Siddhu, Ritesh Joshi and Ravinder Singh.

The satellite pictures of Kumbh mela and pictures of ministerial visits officiating Kumbh mela works have been provided by Incharge kumbh media centre, Dr. Ashok Sharma, Director Uttarakhand Space Application centre Dr. M.M. Kimothi, Advisor to Uttarakhand Chief minister Dr. Rajesh Naithani, Deputy director Information, Rajesh Kumar and Mr. Diwan Bohra. Sincere thanks to British Library London for providing old archives of paintings of Haridwar.

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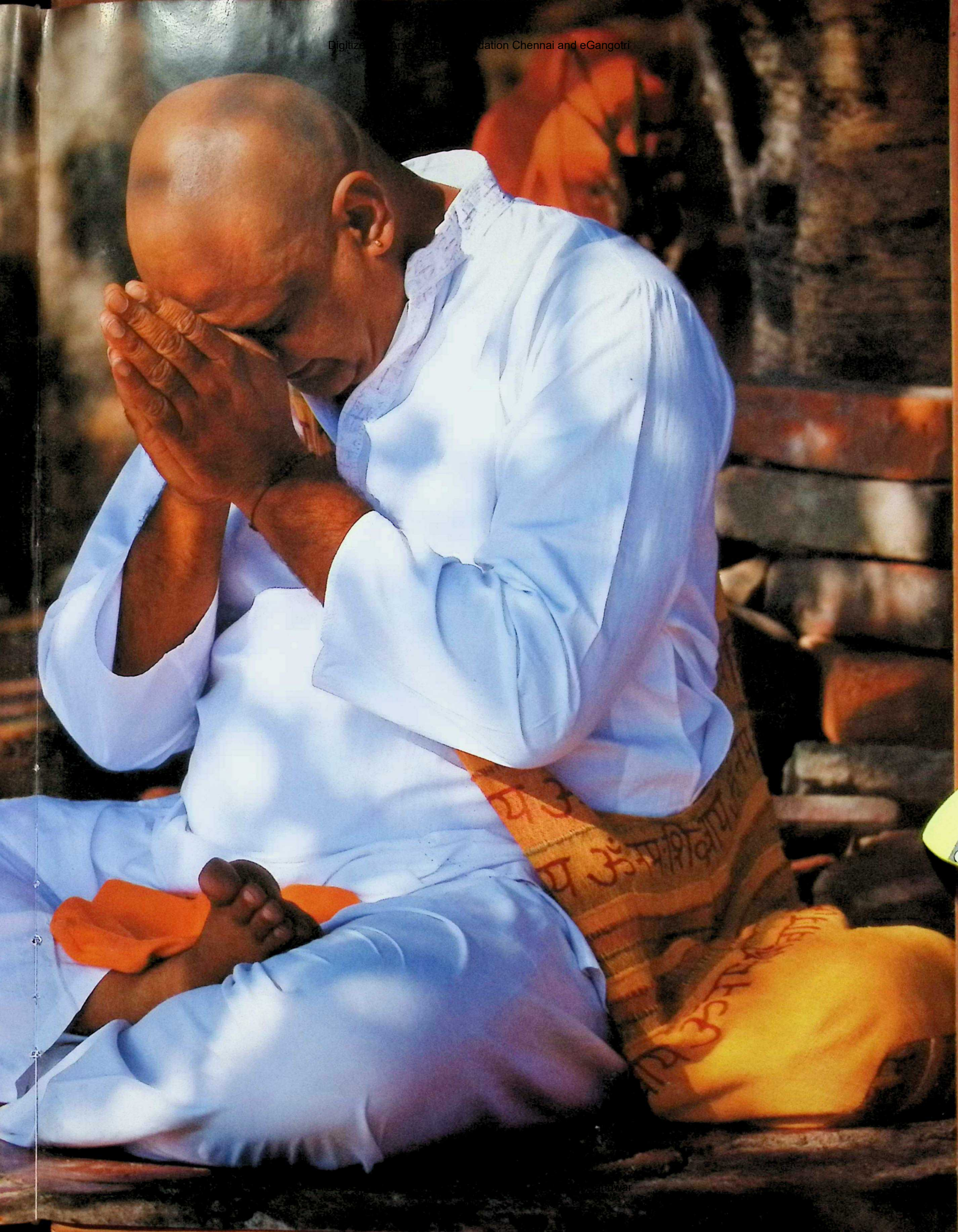

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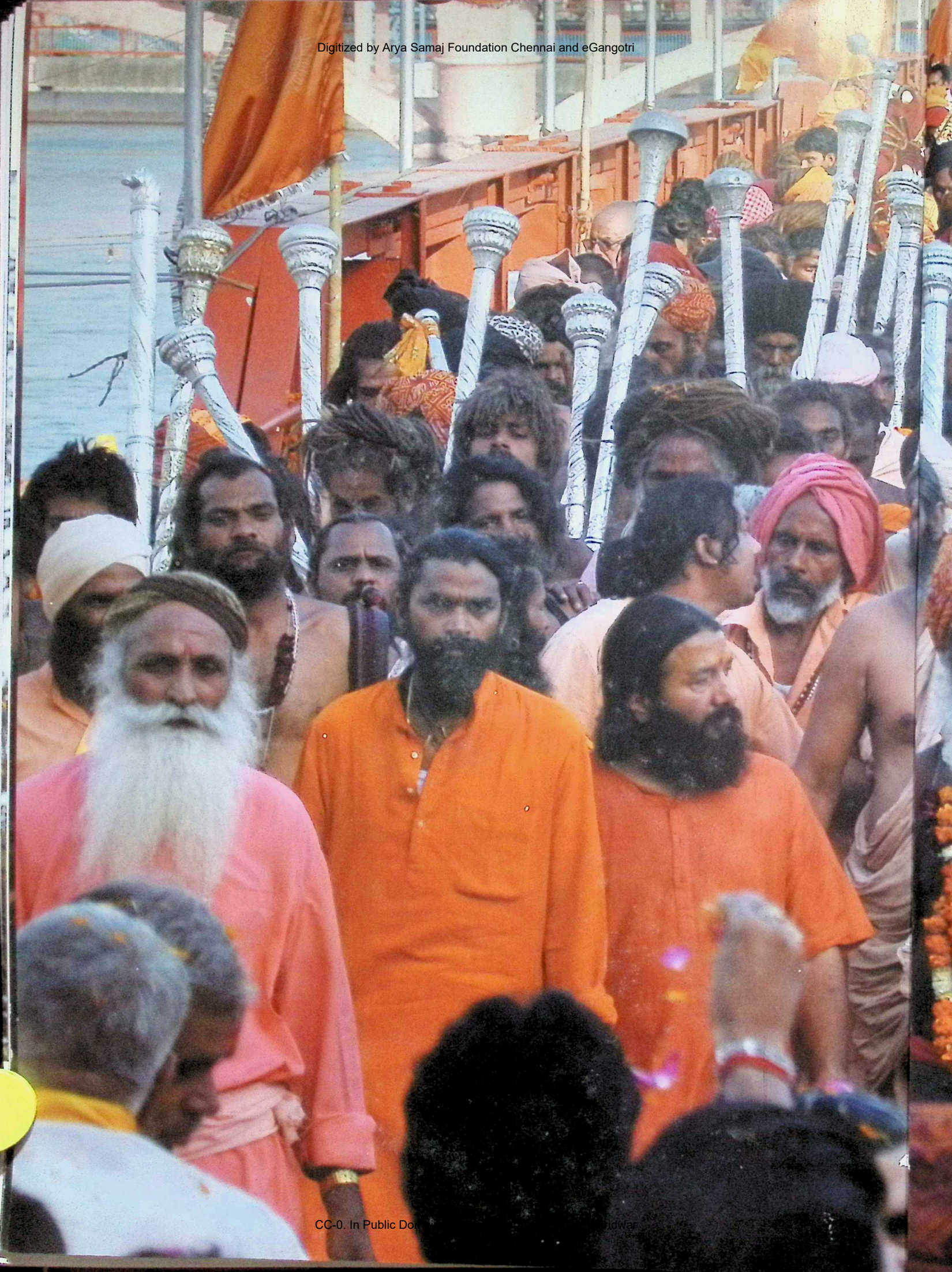

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Dr. Radhika Nagrath is a journalist, historian, researcher, lecturer, author and scholar of a high repute and has spent about 25 years living in the Himalayan state of India, Uttarakhand. Her spiritual temperament and socio cultural interests have led her to write about the mega historical event in the form of a coffee table book. She has been awarded and lauded for her unbiased journalistic skills by 'Himalaya aur Hindustan' group and Women in public sector (WIPS) forum. She was also felicitated with 'Ganesh shankar Vidyarthi award' by National union of Journalists, Uttarakhand for her outstanding contribution in writing and journalism.

Her first book titled "Swami Vivekananda: The known philosopher the unknown poet" published in 2007 on Vivekananda's lesser known poetic persona has been internationally acclaimed. Her second book on "Pieces to Peace" was a product of guided efforts of literary scholars during her visit to US for invited talk on 'peace and reconciliation' in the year 2009 held by University of California, Los Angeles.

Radhika has been a freelance writer for nearly a decade contributing her estimable skills to eminent Indian newspapers like Times of India, Hindustan Times and The Pioneer. For two years she was a feature writer for a monthly journal New Era, published from Doha, Qatar and has been a regular columnist for HtLive Dehradun.

Travelled far and wide in India and abroad for paper presentations and meeting exploration, she is a peace loving Sagittarian. "Spending four months in the vicinity of saints and seers during Kumbh mela 2010 was a lifetime rewarding experience," she says to justify her spiritual inkling.

Dr. Ramesh Pokhariyal 'Nishank' is an established author and poet. He has penned about 40 best selling books on a variety of subjects ranging from poetry, fiction, travelogues and self help subjects. He proved his mettle as a seasoned politician and a fail-proof administrator during the Maha Kumbh Mela-2010, the biggest gathering on planet earth. Despite multiple and serious threat alerts submitted by apex intelligence agencies, he managed the Kumbh Mela with flawless perfection.

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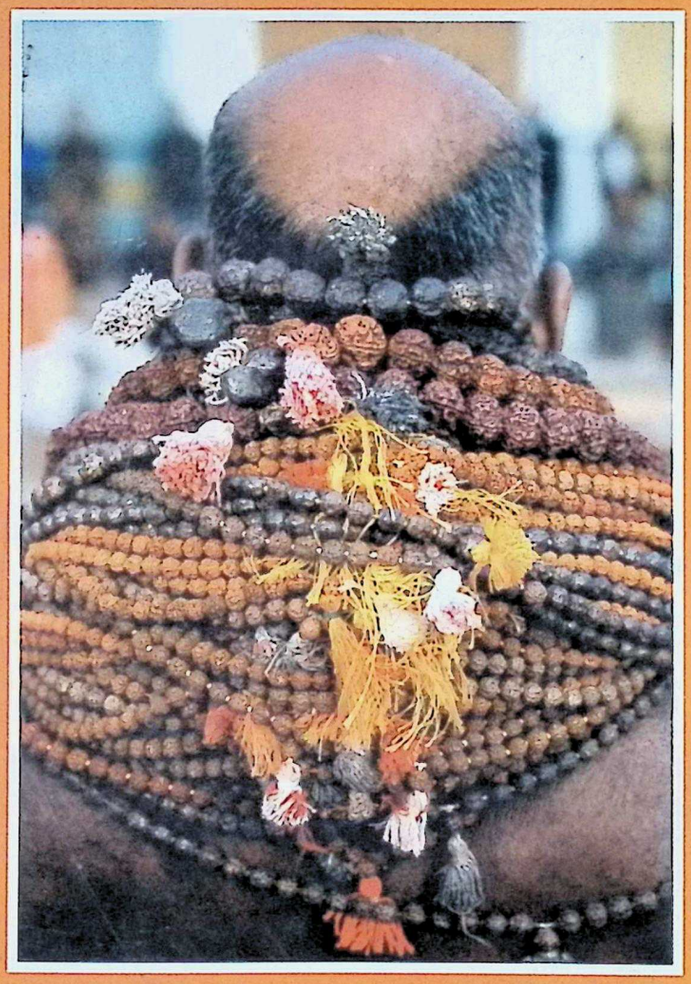

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